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1 - the boy

[image]

It was her first day at her new job.

She was a bit nervous, as anyone would be, but not completely terrified. After all, it was only a department store, not a fancy office.

She walked into the store, already wearing the uniform, and searched for the nearest worker. Instead, they seemed to find her.

"Hi! You must be Ali. I'm the assistant manager, Marina," the girl said, pointing to her name tag with a bright smile. "I'll be helping you settle in today. Follow me."

Marina led her to the checkout section, stopping at an empty cash register. "This will be your usual workspace. Do you have any prior experience with—"

"Hold on, is that a fresh employee I see?" a voice suddenly asked from behind them. Ali watched as a short guy with platinum blonde hair pushed Marina aside, almost tripping her over, before settling his eyes on her. "Now this is exactly what this place needs. Marina, as pretty as you are, you're officially old news."

Marina scrunched her eyebrows, offended. "What—"

"*Anyway*," he cut her off again, turning to the new girl with a friendly smile. "I'm Brady."

"Ali," she replied as her eyes wandered to his hand, where he held a red lollipop.

Brady leaned on the edge of his station, ignoring the annoyed Marina, as he spoke. "So where are you from, Ali?"

"The city not too far from here."

"The *city*?" Brady gasped dramatically. "No way we got a city girl working with us now. It's like all of my prayers are finally being answered. Where exactly in the—"

"Okay, enough of you," Marina interjected, sliding over to stand in front of him, then gestured to the cash register. "So do you have any experience with using this?"

Ali nodded, glancing over her shoulder at Brady in amusement as he sucked on his lollipop. "Yeah, I worked in retail a few years back."

"Oh, great! Then you can go ahead and start. If you have any questions, I'll be walking around from time to time," she said, giving her an encouraging smile, which dropped at the popping sound of a particular lollipop.

"You can ask me for help too since I'm also a cashier, meaning I actually do something around here," Brady added, and Marina turned, tossing him a sharp look.

While the two of them began arguing, Ali's gaze roamed the quiet store until it landed on the customer support section across from her. Or rather, on the tall, dark-haired boy standing idly. She watched curiously as he helped a customer with an impassive look on his face.

Then, suddenly, his demeanor completely changed in a matter of seconds when a charming grin appeared on his lips. The customer, a middle-aged woman, laughed at something he said before walking away happily.

But as soon as the woman's back turned, the same cold expression returned, and he stared down at the floor blankly.

She blinked, dazed. Who was this boy?

2 - his superpower

[image]

a/n: cover art by BTSkookie27ARMY. such a cool picture; thank you again!

Whenever she had a second to spare, her eyes seemed to instinctively travel to him.

At first glance, he looked like a normal person. But she had stared at him long enough now to know that he acted like he was two different people.

He could be emotionless and forbidding one second, then friendly and incredibly pleasant the next. She couldn't process how that could be.

Brady, sucking a green lollipop today, followed her gaze and immediately leapt out of his station. He sprinted over to her side, his lollipop falling to the ground, startling her. "Ali, girl, please stop thinking whatever you're thinking."

"What?" she furrowed her eyebrows in confusion as he placed his hands on her shoulders, his eyes wide with worry. "What's going on, are you okay?"

"Brady! Stop tormenting poor Ali!" Marina shouted, waving her work tablet, when she saw the two of them from across the store. She rushed over to them, giving him a stern look, but he quickly explained himself.

"Marina, I just saw her looking at Sawyer. I'm trying to warn her."

"*Sawyer*?" she repeated loudly, then slapped a hand over her mouth, checking to see if he heard. She lowered her voice, regarding her with the same worried look as Brady. "Ali, whatever you do, *don't* talk to that boy, okay?"

Brady nodded vigorously. "Avoid all contact with him in general."

"Uh, why? What's so bad about him?" Ali asked, shifting uncomfortably under their serious gaze.

"*Why*?" Brady shuddered. "Because that boy is a literal sociopath."

Ali blinked. "What, like Ted Bundy?"

"No, no! Nothing like that," Marina answered hastily, shaking her head. "He's not a killer or anything. He's harmless in that aspect."

"But *psychologically*, he's messed up. He has no type of emotion and treats people like toys. But the scariest part is that he's an exceptional liar. I bet he could manipulate people in his sleep," Brady told her quietly, his eyes trailing over to him before he quickly looked away.

She quirked an eyebrow at them. "Then why does he work in customer support? Or at a department store in general, where he has to constantly deal with people?"

"Because his lying skills are what make him perfect for the job!" Marina stated, gesturing towards a satisfied customer who had just met with him. "For the five years I've worked here, we've had the least amount of complaints when he came along because he talks them out of anything they have to say. It's like his creepy superpower."

"Right, but the only reason he got this job at all is because his dad owns the store, and he wants his son to seem as normal as possible," Brady mentioned while she took in all of the new information. She sneaked another glance at him before they could stop her.

"He doesn't look so scary though," Ali remarked; Brady and Marina laughed.

"Of course not. He's the hottest guy in town," Marina said, and Brady nodded in agreement.

"With that face and height, he could easily pass as a model," Brady sighed, a hint of envy laced in his tone. "But as tempting as he may

be, stay away from Sawyer Price!"

Ali tucked a strand of hair behind her ear awkwardly. "Okay, I will."

"Good. It's for your own well-being, Ali. If you knew him like we do, you'd understand that too. Trust me," Marina assured her before pulling Brady out of there.

Yet even after hearing all of the negative things about him, she still found herself looking over at his alluring figure.

3 - an exception

[image]

a/n: another lovely cover made by BTSkookie27ARMY!

For the following weeks, she made no attempt at talking to him.

She didn't exactly believe in her coworkers' words too much, but she decided it'd be best to trust them. She couldn't think of an excuse to go up to him anyway.

When she walked into the store that day, she was bombarded with the pungent scent of soap and disinfectants. She pinched her nose as she headed to her station, when a familiar face popped up in front of her.

"Um, hi, Marina. You good?" Ali questioned, eyeing her attire, which consisted of hospital scrubs, gloves, and a thick mask.

"No! I'm not good! Several employees caught the stomach flu and they're all stuck at home for the week," Marina exclaimed, clearly stressed, before narrowing her eyes at her. "You don't have it too, do you?"

Ali shook her head. "No, I feel fine."

"Thank God. We need as many people as we can get if we're going to make it through the day," she sighed in relief, pulling out a bottle of hand sanitizer from her pocket to give her.

"I got you covered," Ali promised as she rubbed her hands with the germicide. Marina took a moment to squirt her tenth portion of the morning, then grabbed her tablet from the counter nearby.

After studying the screen, Marina looked back up at her. "Okay, so I need you at customer support today. Brady can handle the cashiers by himself."

"Wait," Ali paused, raising an eyebrow at her. "Customer support?

Isn't *he* there?"

"Yes, Sawyer is there, which is why just the two of you at customer support should be enough."

"Okay, but didn't you tell me to stay away from him?"

"This is an exception! The *only* exception," she emphasized, then gave her a comforting pat on the shoulder. "Don't worry, you'll be fine. Just keep your eyes down and stay at least five feet away from him at all times, 'kay?"

Before she could respond, Marina walked away and clapped her hands at Brady, pressuring him to work faster. Ali turned to him, and he offered her a sympathetic smile, a blue lollipop stuck in between his teeth.

Taking a deep breath, Ali made her way over to customer support and took the farthest spot away from him. Not being able to help herself, she discreetly caught a glimpse of him in the corner of her eye.

He was leaning against the counter, scrolling through his phone. He didn't exactly seem interested in what he was doing, but he was staring down at his screen pretty intensely despite that.

A customer suddenly appeared before her, and she quickly straightened, plastering on a polite smile. "Hi, how can I help you?"

"Yeah, I'd like to file a complaint against one of your workers," the woman, who looked to be in her late forties, said with a deep frown painted on her face.

"Oh, okay. Which one of the workers are you talking about?"

"I believe his name was Brady."

Ali held back a smile. "I see. And for what reason exactly?"

"He was incredibly rude to me. He said that my shirt was, and I quote, *hideous enough to make Gianni Versace puke in his grave*!" she told her, crossing her arms to cover her clothes. "It was extremely

unprofessional."

"I understand, and I completely agree with you, ma'am. On behalf of the store, I sincerely apologize for his behavior," Ali said in her most heartfelt voice, but the woman was not impressed. Instead, it seemed to anger her even more.

"You *understand*? You *apologize*?" the woman scoffed, then looked around. "What a joke. You know what, I'd like to talk to your manager!"

Ali was about to try to convince her otherwise when she suddenly felt a tall presence beside her. She slowly twisted her head, and her lungs seemed to momentarily forget how to function.

It was Sawyer, wearing the striking grin that had her doubting everything her coworkers had said.

4 - poker face

[image]

A/N: beautiful and fitting cover by zoe_manijeh!

Ali stood silently and stiffly as he leaned over her, gracing the irritated customer with his attention.

"Good morning, ma'am. I was just standing over there when I noticed your blouse," Sawyer said, his voice surprisingly silky and inviting. "And I must say, it looks beautiful on you."

The woman peered at him for a second, then cleared her throat. "Well, thank you. But I would really like to speak to your manager —"

"I'm sorry, but is that an original Bill Gibb design?" he suddenly asked, gesturing to her shirt, and she paused.

"Why, yes, it is. I'm impressed a young man like you is familiar with his work."

He smiled, something that was probably more infectious than the stomach flu going around. "Oh, I think everyone should know about him. His use of color and pattern is art itself. I feel so blessed to have seen his work in person, especially on someone so gorgeous."

"Oh, you're too kind," the woman blushed, giggling.

"I'm only being honest," Sawyer shrugged, and she pursed her lips, thinking.

"Well, I'll pass on speaking to your manager this time. It's the least I can do for a fellow Bill Gibb fan such as yourself."

Ali's mouth practically dropped at her words, while Sawyer didn't look the least bit surprised. "Thank you so much, you're an absolute angel."

"Oh, stop," she laughed before making her way to the exit. "Goodbye now! It was a pleasure meeting you!"

Ali, who hadn't gotten a word in for the entire conversation, quickly yelled out to her. "Have a good day, ma'am! Come again!"

She then turned, and came face to face with a person who looked nothing like who she had just seen.

He was still standing next to her, but he didn't meet her eyes, staring out into the distance instead. She studied his face for a moment now that she was up close.

He had dark, lifeless orbs and thick eyelashes. She tried her best to read his expression, which proved to be impossible. She wasn't sure if it was because he had a flawless poker face, or because there truly wasn't anything to read into.

She then cleared her throat, tearing her eyes away from him. "So thanks for helping me out. That was nice of you."

"Was it?" he replied flatly, still not looking directly at her, and she slowly nodded.

"Yes. It was," she affirmed awkwardly before a thought came to mind. "Hey, how come you're interested in this Bill Gibb guy?"

He shifted, his eyes gliding over to the other side of the store beyond her. "I'm not. I noticed the label on her shirt and looked him up before coming over."

"Oh. That's actually really smart," she murmured, astonished.

"Yeah," he said, and before she could say anything else, he went back to his corner. She gazed at him as he began to scroll through his phone again.

Why did she wish she could talk to him some more?

5 - a disease

A/N: beautiful minimalistic cover by takethеavocado !

For the rest of the week, she was placed in customer support with him.

Marina apologized profusely for it, and Brady offered to sacrifice himself multiple times, but she willingly declined. Little did they know, she was actually enjoying herself in what they viewed as a nightmare.

Although they hadn't spoken since that day he helped her, she was still entertained by his everyday behavior. Watching him interact with customers was the most fascinating thing she had ever seen; it was almost like watching an animal in its natural habitat.

But as intriguing as it was, she still had the unfathomable desire to have a conversation with him.

Today, being the last day she would work with him before returning to the cash register, was her only chance. With the courage she had built up throughout the week, she waited till no customers were around to step towards him.

"Hey," Ali managed to utter, chewing the inside of her cheek nervously.

He paused from scrolling, but didn't lift his head. "Hi."

"This might be weird, but I just wanted to tell you that I think you're amazing at what you do. I've never seen anyone who could persuade people as well as you do," she admitted, which seemed to briefly interest him when he slid his phone back into his pocket.

"You think I'm amazing?" Sawyer questioned curiously, keeping his gaze low.

She hesitated, uncertain about how to respond. "Well, yeah. You

have a talent, I would say."

"Most people call it a disease," he countered, his voice frosty yet soft.

"Oh," she swallowed back the lump in her throat, fidgeting with her hands. "Only if you look at it in a negative light."

"And you don't look at it that way?"

"No," she answered honestly.

For a minute, she thought the conversation had ended there already, but then he looked up. Her breath seemed to get caught in her throat as she waited to lock eyes with him.

Except the moment never came, and instead, his eyes landed on her name tag.

"Ali," he read, cocking his head. "That's a strange name."

"It's short for Alice."

He nodded. "I like that more."

She pursed her lips, not sure how to react to his words, then gestured to his own name tag. "Sawyer is a nice name too."

"Yeah."

As usual, he returned to his phone without another word, but she didn't mind. He didn't seem to notice, but a small smile had spread across her face afterwards.

That was their first conversation.

6 - pathological liar

A/N: another amazing cover by takethеavocado ; i love how ominous this one is!

Going back to her cashier position made her oddly disappointed, and it didn't go unnoticed by her sweet-toothed coworker.

Brady swirled the purple lollipop in his mouth as he narrowed his eyes at the mysterious girl across from him. As always, she was constantly looking back at the customer support section with a crestfallen look on her face.

He pushed himself off of the edge of the counter and made his way towards her.

"Hey, where are you going? I haven't paid for my clothes!" his customer called out, but he waved dismissively.

"Just press some buttons, you'll figure it out," he assured them before reaching the city girl's station. She jumped slightly when she noticed him in front of her.

"Hi, Brady."

He grinned. "Hi, Ali. What were you looking at?"

"Oh, the, um, baby food aisle," she said, raising her hand to point behind her, but he slowly pushed it down.

"I see spending some time with the pathological liar didn't help *your* skills at all."

Ali smiled sheepishly. "I don't think anyone could help me with that."

"Hm. Well, I've actually been meaning to ask how much last week scarred you. Five whole days with that beautiful, but scary, guy must've done a number on you," Brady said, and she looked down at

her hands, thinking.

"I mean, I guess. He didn't scar me too much," Ali muttered, then shrugged nonchalantly. "Or like, at all."

Brady suddenly threw his arms up, making her jump once again, and pointed an accusing finger at her. "I knew it! You actually think he's nice!"

"Well, he's not *mean*."

"No, but he could be if it benefitted him," he retorted, crossing his arms. "So did you talk to him?"

"A little."

"And what did you think?"

Ali thought back, her lips forming into a smile. "I don't know. He was kind of sweet, in an emotionless way."

"How is that even *possible*? Do you hear yourself right now?" Brady shook his head, and she chuckled.

"He's really not that bad, Brady."

He sighed. "I know he's not the worst person in the world, but he is definitely not someone that you should be friends with."

She glanced back at the boy they were talking about, trying to decide for herself if he was right.

"But that doesn't matter anyway," Brady suddenly said, getting a last lick on his lollipop before throwing it away. She looked back at him, puzzled at his words. "After all, Sawyer Price isn't the type of person to make friends or hang out with anyone for long periods of time. He probably won't talk to you again unless he's forced to."

Ali frowned. Was their first conversation actually their last?

7 - mr. price

A/N: thank you again to taketheavocado for all these aesthetic covers!

After two uneventful weeks passed, she was finally convinced that they would truly never talk to each other ever again.

It was a sad reality, but she knew she had to come to terms with it. Besides, she wasn't looking for a long-term relationship of any kind. The only reason she moved out of the city was to take care of her grandmother, and it was better for her to focus on that.

"Okay, guys, don't freak out, but Mr. Price is coming in today!" Marina whispered excitedly, clutching her tablet to her chest.

Ali eyed the enthusiastic smile that crawled onto Brady's face at the news and furrowed her eyebrows. "Who is that?"

"Sawyer's dad, the owner of the store," Brady informed her. "He comes in every few months to check on everything. But personally, I think he does it to keep tabs on his son."

Marina nodded in agreement. "Every time he's here, they always have a private conversation in his office, and it lasted a whole day one time."

"He probably uses that time to grill the *hell* out of his son. I think he still hopes that he'll snap out of the whole sociopathic thing one day," Brady said as he unwrapped a yellow lollipop that he seemed to pull out of thin air.

Marina visibly froze as loud footsteps echoed from the entrance. She swiftly yanked the lollipop from his mouth, threw it in the trash can, then pushed them over to their stations. "Quick! Pretend you're working!"

Ali opened up the cash register and began counting the money

while Brady awkwardly fixed the plastic bags from the holder. The footsteps continued to grow louder until they finally came into view.

"Good morning, Mr. Price! Glad to see you again!" Marina greeted him nervously, wearing a cheerful smile on her lips.

Ali glanced up to catch a glimpse of him, and her eyes widened. He was as tall as his son with the same dark hair, but with a few grays in the midst. It was like looking at the future Sawyer.

With that thought, she then noticed his impassive son with him, who kept his gaze forward as he walked behind his father. She wondered what was going through his mind in that moment.

"Ah, it's always nice to see my favorite assistant manager," Mr. Price smiled kindly at her. "How are things with you, Marina?"

"They're great, sir! The store has been doing very well since the last time you visited, and we actually have a new employee. Her name is Ali," Marina told him before gesturing to her station.

His eyes slowly landed on her, and she immediately straightened. He gave her a friendly wave. "Nice to meet you, Ali. Welcome to the team."

She smiled. "Thank you, Mr. Price."

After some more small talk, the two Price men then retreated into a private office, closing the door behind them. Brady didn't wait another second to run over to her side, pulling out his backup lollipop.

"Let's have a discussion about this," he started, and Marina rolled her eyes tiredly.

"Here we go."

"Now, as always, Sawyer has the benefit of age going for him. That twenty-year-old glow does wonders," Brady said, taking a moment to suck on the lollipop.

Marina hummed in approval. "Good point."

Ali stared at them in amusement as she continued to count the coins in the cash register. Brady clicked his tongue, ready to present the other side of the discussion. "*But* they're both equally as beautiful, and his dad has something called sanity on his side too. Choose your fighter."

"Well, I'm not saying I have a crush on my boss," Marina tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, smiling. "But I would definitely choose Mr. Price."

Brady gave her a look. "You're literally saying you have a crush on your boss."

"Shut up! I was just giving my opinion—" Marina paused when a door was suddenly slammed shut with a bang that echoed through the store.

Ali jumped at the sound, dropping her coins. She crouched down to pick them up, sighing, and pulled her hair back so it wouldn't cover her face.

As she was getting the last coin, a large shadow was casted over her and she turned, expecting to see the lollipop fanatic. "Come to finish your disc—"

The words got lost in her throat as she realized who was in front of her.

The sociopath.

8 - appropriate guide

Ali looked up at him, completely dumbstruck at his presence, and slowly rose from the ground.

He watched her hands as she placed the coins back in the cash register. When she was finished, his gaze floated away to a spot behind her while she stared into his cold eyes.

"Hi, Sawyer," she said as he stood there, his hands stuffed into his pockets.

"Hi, Alice."

She pursed her lips, then awkwardly rocked on the balls of her feet. "So... what are you doing here?"

"I wanted to ask you something," he told her, and she nodded, trying to hide her desperate curiosity.

"Okay. Go ahead."

"Would you want to hang out with me sometime?"

Ali blinked. "What?"

"Like go eat somewhere," Sawyer briefly glanced at her face when she looked away. "Have you never done that before?"

"No, I have. I, uh, always eat somewhere, yeah," she answered hastily, and he nodded.

"Okay. Then how about we eat somewhere together?"

She furrowed her eyebrows, intrigued. "But why?"

He didn't respond for a moment, and she watched as his eyes traveled across the store. When he finally arrived at an answer, she noticed the way his voice seemed more calculated, like when he

talked to customers. "Because you're new to town and it's good to have someone to show you around. I've lived here all of my life, so I'm an appropriate guide."

Ali narrowed her eyes at him, doubting the truth behind his carefully chosen words. She, too, took a minute to reply this time as she contemplated his offer. He waited not-so-patiently in front of her, but didn't say a word.

"Okay, when?" she suddenly asked, which made him shift slightly in his spot.

"Tomorrow night."

Ali nodded. "Works for me."

"Good," Sawyer said, and she gave him a questioning look when he didn't move.

"Is that all?"

His gaze dipped to the floor. "No. You missed a coin."

She turned and quickly grabbed it from beneath her shoe. By the time she got up, he had already walked away without a goodbye. She stared at his tall figure as he returned to customer support, painting on the charming smile on his face like it was a canvas.

Her eyes wandered over to the corner of the store, where his father's office was situated. His door was closed, and she wondered what had happened behind it.

Had she just gotten involved in the battle of the Prices?

9 - a deal

Seeing him outside of the store was strange.

For one, she almost didn't recognize him out of uniform. Wearing an all black outfit from his T-shirt to his sneakers, he looked completely different, but his style fitted him perfectly.

However, not everything changed about him. As she sat across from him at a beachside restaurant, she spent their entire dinner watching him with fascination.

In the short time that they had spent there so far, he had managed to get the chef's secret recipe, trick the waiter into thinking he hadn't gotten more than three refills, and turn the manager into his personal parking valet. Needless to say, his skills were dauntingly impressive.

"You're so interesting," Ali told him when there was a moment of silence.

He didn't look at her, of course, but he paused from finding his next challenge. "You think so?"

"Yeah. You're kind of like a puzzle, and I'm trying to figure you out."

"Hm." Sawyer pursed his lips, then pulled out some cash. He tossed it onto the table before standing. "Let's go now."

She frowned. "Already?"

He seemed to freeze for a moment, not sure what to do. "You don't want to leave yet?"

"Well, it's only been an hour. I don't know, I wanted to be out a little longer," she said sheepishly, and his eyes quickly swept over her.

After a minute, he nodded. "Okay. Come on."

Smiling, she followed him outside and onto the pier. He walked next to her, his hands hanging loosely by his sides, while his gaze wandered aimlessly. The light sea breeze passed over them, making her hair fall over her face, which momentarily caught his attention.

They eventually reached the middle of the pier, where there was a bench, and they both plopped down on it. Only the whistle of the breeze filled the silence around them as she peered at him.

Finally, she cleared her throat, averting her gaze to the ocean across from them. "So what did your dad say that made you invite me to hang out?"

Sawyer snapped his head towards her, startled. "What do you mean?"

"Let me guess, he wants you to be normal, and in order to get him off your back, you told him you were going out with me. Does that sound about right?"

He opened his mouth.

"And don't bother lying," she quickly added.

"I wasn't going to," he replied, and although it was nearly impossible to tell if he was being honest, she believed him. "But you're right. You knew all along?"

Ali shrugged, eyeing the gentle waves below them. "I had my suspicions. It was sort of obvious."

"Then why did you come at all?"

"Because I wanted to make you a deal," she said, turning back to him, and he swiftly looked away.

"A deal?" he echoed, somewhat amused.

"Yes, one that'll benefit both of us," Ali continued, folding her hands in her lap. "Basically, we'll keep hanging out as much as you

think is necessary to fool your dad, but on one condition."

He faced her, but kept his eyes above her.

"You can't lie to me under any circumstances."

Sawyer, wearing his signature enigmatic expression, took a moment to process her words. Much to her surprise, he answered rather quickly. "Okay. It's a deal, Alice."

"Really?" she smiled, her eyes shining with excitement, as she clasped her hands together. "Great! I can't wait."

"Yeah," he muttered, turning away from her once more. He then stood from the bench and began walking back to the parking lot. She caught up with him, beaming, while he looked at everything but her.

She had finally found an excuse to talk to him.

10 - true colors

The next day, she practically drowned in the worries of her coworkers.

"How did it go with Sawyer, Ali?" Brady placed a comforting hand on her shoulder, his expression drenched with sympathy. "How fragile is your mental stability now?"

"The same as it was before."

He clicked his tongue. "Well, that's still questionable."

"What awful place did he take you?" Marina asked, already wincing in apprehension, while Brady shuddered.

"This nice little restaurant by the beach," Ali answered as she tied up her hair into a loose bun. "Then we went on the pier and talked for a bit."

"You...talked?" Marina repeated, blinking vigorously, and Ali nodded.

"*Willingly*?" Brady continued; Ali nodded again. Her coworkers exchanged baffled looks, then turned back to her. "That's, um, interesting. At least you won't be going out with him anymore though."

Ali shrugged. "Who said I wasn't?"

Before either of them could detonate at her words, a familiar pair of loud, strong footsteps resounded through the department store. All three of them immediately returned to their posts and waited for the two most intimidating men in town to appear.

Mr. Price was the first one they saw, greeting them all with a charming smile, which actually reminded her of his son's, but more genuine. His eyes seemed to instantly fall on her, and it startled her for a moment.

Then his son came into view, who also twisted his head in her direction, but not exactly meeting her gaze. Before his father could utter a word, he plastered on a small smile and offered her a wave.

"Hi, Alice. I had a great time last night. Hopefully we can hang out again soon," Sawyer said, and although she knew it was all a facade, she didn't stop herself from believing him.

"Yeah," she smiled. "Me too. It was fun."

Sawyer then made his way to customer support, while his father stayed back for a minute. He eyed her briefly before clearing his throat, tightening the tie around his neck. After the routine pleasantries, he hid himself away in his office for the rest of the day, leaving her in her coworkers' paranoid hands.

"You saw that? Even his *father* is creeped out that you two actually enjoyed yourselves," Brady remarked as he pointed his orange lollipop towards her accusingly.

Ali shook her head and gave them both a reassuring smile. "Listen, guys. Thanks to you two, I know to be careful around Sawyer, so just be comforted by that thought, alright? I have the situation under control. Don't worry about me."

"Oh, Ali, I'm sorry," Marina sighed, looking down at the floor. "I just don't want you to get sucked into his world like we all did once. Trust me, it's all rainbows and sunshine at first, but then you see his true colors, which aren't in the rainbow for a reason."

Ali stifled a chuckle when she realized how serious they were, and she cleared her throat. "I understand that, and I'm glad I have people like you watching my back. But I'm all good, I swear."

Brady narrowed his eyes at her while Marina tapped on her tablet anxiously. It was obvious that they still weren't satisfied with her words.

"Look, we probably won't be hanging out again for a while anyway. So save your stress for later," Ali said, and they instantly brightened.

"Music to my ears!" Brady sang before returning to his cash register, twirling his lollipop around like a baton. Marina gave her a happy smile, then went back to surveying the store with her tablet in hand.

Ali pursed her lips as she stole a glance at a particular customer support worker, but turned away before anyone could notice.

Except he did.

11 - his advantage

A few days had passed before he invited her out again, in the same awkward fashion as last time.

"I was thinking of taking you to an ice cream shop. It's a town staple, or at least that's what people say," he suggested, staring at the cash register beside her, and she nodded.

"I'm always up for ice cream. What day?"

"We could go tomorrow after work."

Before she could respond, Marina suddenly materialized across from them, clutching her tablet to her chest tightly. She looked between them two and cleared her throat. "Um, Ali, I actually wanted to tell you that you could pick up some extra shifts, if you'd like. I know you asked me about it last week, and I've officially sorted things out for you now."

"Oh, really? That'd be a huge help, thank you," Ali gave her a grateful smile.

"But, uh, that means you won't have as much free time as usual," Marina continued, and Ali frowned, realizing that jeopardized their ice cream plans.

Sawyer seemed to come to the same conclusion when he stepped forward, cocking his head. "Do you mean she won't have the same work schedule as me?"

"Yes," Marina swallowed down the lump in her throat. "Instead of finishing around two like you, she'll be working until seven."

Ali looked up at him. "It's okay, Sawyer. We can reschedule for this weekend."

"No. That's too far," he replied, which made her eyebrows rise in surprise. Marina, too, was flabbergasted by his words, but her face

changed abruptly into one of distress.

Ali, confused, searched for what could've alarmed her. She turned to him, and it suddenly dawned on her.

Sawyer was looking at Marina, as in meeting her eyes directly. He did the same with his customers, but it usually came with his irresistible, painted smile as well. However, that smile was nowhere to be seen now.

As his dead eyes bored into hers, she couldn't help but cower in fear. His voice matched the cold intensity in his orbs. "So, Marina, you're saying that Alice will coincidentally be too busy for me from now on?"

Marina nodded feebly in response.

Sawyer took another step forward, closer to her, and she tightened her grip on her tablet. Ali narrowed her eyes at the scene, analyzing him. He wasn't being openly threatening per se, but he was using the fact that she feared him to his advantage.

"Well, she's not starting her extra shifts today, is she?" he questioned, never once breaking eye contact with her.

Marina hesitated. "No, she starts tomorrow."

"In that case," Sawyer twisted his head in her direction, but he didn't meet her eyes like he did with Marina. "Are you free today?"

"I, um," Ali glanced at Marina, who shook her head vigorously, before returning to him. "Yeah, I have a few hours to spare."

"Great. Any further objections?" he asked as he looked back at the defeated assistant manager. When she didn't respond, he turned around and casually made his way back to customer support.

Ali watched him, once again left with many more questions about the mysterious boy, but she decided she would finally get her answers today.

12 - the truth

They were sitting outside on a wooden bench, watching as the cars whizzed by on the street before them.

She peeked at him as he scooped a spoonful of ice cream from his cup and let the contents melt in his mouth. He had chosen chocolate, a common preference, while she chose chocolate chip cookie dough instead.

"Is yours good?" she asked him, and he shrugged, glancing down at the cold liquid.

"Tastes like ice cream," he replied blandly.

She, however, seemed to be in complete bliss as she ate some of her own. "Mine tastes like heaven."

He glanced at her face, and she, sensing his unexpected gaze, turned to him. He looked away instantly, like it was almost a reflex by now.

Holding back a disappointed frown, Ali cleared her throat. "So how long have you been working for your dad?"

"Four years now."

"Do you like your job?"

Sawyer seemed to hesitate for a moment, then let out a short breath, recalling their deal. "No."

"Then how come you haven't quit, if you don't mind me asking?" she set down her empty ice cream cup on the bench. "I mean, you're only twenty, right? You can be anything you want, so what's your dream job?"

"Dream job?" he repeated, slightly resembling a confused child, and she nodded.

"Yeah, like when you were a kid, what did you want to be when you grew up?"

Sawyer took a brief second to consider her question while she studied his face. There was no point in trying to read him, but staring at his sharp chiseled features wasn't a bother either. "I've never thought about that."

She furrowed her eyebrows at his odd response. "Never? Is that even possible?"

"For some people," Sawyer answered ambiguously; she swiftly turned away, catching on to what he meant. She once again felt his cold, curious scrutiny after a moment and tilted her head to glimpse at him.

Seemingly having a sixth sense, he brought his gaze back to the cars just before she looked at him. This time, she did not hold back her frown, and she decided to not hold back her thoughts either.

"Why do you do that?" Ali questioned gruffly, her exasperated tone startling him enough to sit up.

"Do what?"

Ali then leaned forward and craned her neck to look directly into his face, but he immediately looked to the side. She slouched back against the bench, crossing her arms. "*That*."

He twisted his head forward again without showing a hint of guilt or embarrassment, but she caught the way his Adam's apple bobbed forcefully.

She continued: "At first, I thought you were just one of those people who don't like eye contact, which is fine. But then I realized that you always look at all of your customers in the eye, and you did so with Marina today too. So it's really just me you don't do that with, and I can't figure out *why*."

When he still didn't respond, she sighed and rested her head on the bench behind her, softening her voice. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to put you on the spot like that. It just makes me anxious. Let's talk

about something else."

She was about to open her mouth as she thought of another conversation starter when he suddenly cleared his throat. She scrunched her eyebrows as he began speaking in a voice that neither she, nor he, recognized. "You didn't notice, but I caught you staring at me before we met. You had that curious look on your face, one that everyone has when they first see me, until they finally talk to me."

Sawyer swallowed, feeling his throat dry out as the air he breathed seemed to grow colder. "Their face eventually changes into one of fear or disapproval or judgment instead. But you...you still haven't changed."

"Even now, after I'm sure our coworkers have told you all about me," he said, and she scratched her head, feigning cluelessness. "You still look at me like I'm normal. Like what I am is normal."

He then lowered his head into his hands; she strained her ears to hear his next words. "The fact that you think of me that way makes it hard for me to meet your eyes because I have no idea how to talk to you, how to be *around* someone like you."

As she listened to him spew out the truth with a difficulty that could be heard from the guttural effort of his throat, she realized something. It was obvious from the very start, yet she had missed it.

She gazed down at his hunched, frustrated figure and asked him: "You mean you don't know how to manipulate me?"

It was silent for a moment, with only the whooshing cars to fill the void, as he fully registered her words. She watched him slowly lift his head and lean back on the wooden bench. His dark eyes danced in thought before finally coming to a conclusion, settling his gaze on her shoes.

"Yes," Sawyer confessed, nodding. "You're right, I don't. And I'll never be able to figure it out because of our deal."

"Hm," Ali mused as a small smile crept onto her face. "Good."

Sawyer ignored her comment and stood, making his way towards his car. She untangled her arms to grab her ice cream cup before quickly catching up with him.

She followed him to his car, then awkwardly rocked on the balls of her feet in front of him. He opened his car door and waited for her to speak, keeping his eyes low.

Finally, she settled on something to say, as ordinary as it was. "Well, this was fun."

"Yeah," he muttered under his breath as she smiled.

"Rather enlightening actually, so thank you for that," she remarked teasingly, yet he seemed to miss that part in her tone.

"You're welcome."

Ali stared at him for another couple of seconds before letting out a sigh, content with their interaction of the day. "Alright, I'll set you free now. See you at work, Sawyer."

She then walked across the small parking lot to her car, humming a tune that plagued her mind. Halfway through, he suddenly called out to her: "You have ice cream all over your face, Alice!"

She froze, baffled, as she lifted her hand to touch her lips. Her cheeks burned with embarrassment when she realized that he was right.

"Why didn't you tell me so—" she paused when she turned, seeing that he had already climbed into his car.

Narrowing her eyes at the black car as it rolled away, she swore she saw a shadow of a smile on his face in the side-view mirror.

13 - stormy eyes

More than a week had flew by since their last outing, but she barely had the time to notice.

Ever since she picked up some more shifts, in order to pay her grandmother's medical bills, she didn't have a single moment to herself. She was in no position to complain, and she refused to do so, despite Brady's pleadings for gossip. Although she had to admit, she was utterly exhausted.

After closing up her cash register for a water break, she turned around and immediately stumbled back. She sighed. "Sawyer, you really need to learn some greetings. A little hi would be nice."

"Hi."

"No, I meant that you should say it before—" Ali paused, realizing who she was speaking to, and waved her hand dismissively. "Never mind. But anyway, how are you? It's been a while."

He shrugged. "Fine. What about you?"

"Ah, I've been okay. Working at the cash register for so long is doing a number on me, but I'm alright. I'm just sorry we haven't been able to hang out as often," she said, and this seemed to spur his attention. His eyes trailed across the store beyond her, moving almost robotically, until he finally found what he was searching for.

Ali, curious, followed behind him as he walked off. When she realized the direction he was heading in, she almost considered turning back.

"Marina."

She turned around with a smile that was certain to fall. "Yes—oh. Sawyer, um, how can I help you?"

"You should change Alice's position to customer support," he

suddenly blurted, and the two girls gaped at him.

"Wait, Sawyer, I didn't agree to that," Ali interjected, furrowing her eyebrows at him.

He briefly looked her way, managing to avoid her eyes in the process, before he spoke. "You said working as a cashier is making you tired."

"Yeah, but I don't mind it too much. Besides, the customer support positions are all filled up."

"I'm sure someone would be more than willing to switch," Sawyer retorted, indirect iciness laced in his tone for a split second, then he gestured behind her. "And Brady could always help out, couldn't you, Brady?"

The platinum blonde boy froze at hearing his name come out of his mouth, and he sheepishly came out of hiding. Ali, who hadn't noticed his presence, glanced at him as he swirled a pink lollipop in his mouth. "I mean, I guess I could help out my favorite city girl. If she wants me to."

Ali pursed her lips, contemplating the offer. Her gaze swept over the enigmatic boy with the stormy eyes, and she sighed in defeat. "Alright, I'm willing to try it. It couldn't hurt, right?"

"Well—" the words melted away in Brady's mouth when Sawyer threw him a look over his shoulder, and he swiftly glued his lips together.

The three of them then turned to their supervisor, who had remained strangely silent as she watched their interaction unfold. Her eyes had studied the sociopath's face meticulously throughout the conversation, finding thin threads of an indistinct emotion in his expression, none of which she had ever seen in the four years she knew him.

Marina looked between the two of them and clicked her tongue. "Okay, I'll work it out by the end of the day."

"Thank you, Marina. Sorry for the trouble," Ali gave her a

apologetic smile before walking away with Sawyer, who hadn't reacted in any particular way to the news.

Brady stood beside her as they watched the couple in front of them. He crossed his arms, holding onto the lollipop with his right hand. "Is it just me, or did it seem like Sawyer, the sociopath, cared about someone other than himself?"

"I really don't know," Marina murmured absentmindedly, narrowing her eyes at them in the distance. They stayed there for the next minute, both staring in wonderment, before she finally returned to reality and abruptly snatched his lollipop. "Back to work, sweet tooth."

He huffed as he grudgingly trudged back to his station. "A guy can't even lick his lollipop in peace anymore."

14 - thank you

She had to admit: working at customer support was much less stressful. Only it wasn't because of the position itself, it was because of her sociopathic coworker.

Every time a customer came up to her station, Sawyer would jump at the chance to intervene, unless he was with a customer himself. She found it strange, considering he didn't do the same for the other two customer support employees.

She decided to confront him about it, now knowing that he was willing to open up to her if she did.

"Hey, Sawyer," Ali called when there was an idle moment to spare. She watched as he stuffed his phone into his back pocket before coming up to her, staring above her. "Let me ask you something."

"Okay."

Ali cleared her throat. "So don't get me wrong, I do appreciate how much you've been helping me, but can you tell me why you're doing it exactly? Like—"

"No," Sawyer cut her off sharply; she blinked.

"No?"

"No."

"Um, why?" she questioned, puzzled. "I thought you were okay with answering these type of things."

"I am," he assured her, but she only grew even more confused. His eyes dipped down to her face for a split second, before she could even react to it, then pursed his lips. "It's because I don't have an answer to your question."

Ali looked down. "Oh."

"Yeah," Sawyer replied, and knowing that was his equivalent of 'bye', she quickly continued the conversation before he could leave.

"Well, that's okay. You don't have to have an answer to everything," she smiled up at him, emanating nothing but warmth. "That's normal."

Sawyer froze at the charged word, and she furrowed her eyebrows when she noticed the sudden unease in his expression. She stepped closer to him, hearing his breath become shallow. "Hey, hey, I'm sorry if I said something wrong. I didn't mean to upset you. I'm so sorry, Sawyer."

Ali tried to reach for his hand to comfort him, but he quickly drew back. She frowned, although more worried than offended. Before she could speak again, he slowly parted his lips as his eyes passed over her.

"No," he whispered quietly. "Don't be sorry."

She looked up at him while his gaze fell down to her hands. He hesitantly, almost *nervously*, inched his hand toward hers until he finally touched her warm skin. He swallowed roughly before murmuring a soft: "Thank you."

And with that, Sawyer walked away from the customer support section, deciding to take his break. Ali blinked, her eyes following him in bewilderment.

Ali glanced down at her hand as she felt her heart clench. She didn't understand what had just happened, and she guessed he didn't either, but she knew it meant something. Something important.

15 - just friends

After the emotionally confusing moment that they shared, they quickly returned to their work norms.

He continued to help her whenever he could, and she didn't try to stop him. She had realized that it was something he genuinely wanted to do for her, for reasons neither of them questioned.

Ali leaned on the counter as she watched Sawyer take care of her customer, a faint smile hanging from her lips. When her sweet-tooth coworker suddenly hopped onto the counter beside her, she almost tripped over her own feet.

"Oh my God, Brady," Ali breathed, putting a hand over her heart, and he quirked an eyebrow at her.

"I'm sorry, did I distract you from staring dreamily at Sawyer?"

She flushed in embarrassment. "No, of course not."

"Uh-huh," Brady said as he unwrapped a new black lollipop, halloween-themed. "This infatuation you got with him is getting a little out of hand, don't you think?"

"I'm not infatuated with him. We're just friends," Ali objected, and she watched as Brady's eyes slowly drifted away from her. Feeling a familiarly tall presence behind her, she turned and raised her eyebrows at him. "Right, Sawyer? Aren't we friends?"

The expressionless man seemed to pause for a second, but his voice remained firm. "Yes. We are."

"Really? It's not just a front?" Brady questioned, then leaned towards her as he lowered his voice. "You know, like out of pity?"

Ali glanced at Sawyer, who was distracted with his phone, then vigorously shook her head.

"Not at all. I like spending time with Sawyer, so why wouldn't we be friends?" she said, then chuckled as an afterthought. "I mean, I know friendship is a two-way street, and I can't speak for him, but hopefully he does too."

"I do."

Both Ali and Brady fell silent at his quick and definite response. She slowly looked up at him, and he caught a glimpse of the emotional glint in her orbs. He, however, couldn't fathom the immeasurable warmth that seemed to flood her body in that moment.

Brady curiously scrutinized the couple as he sucked on his lollipop. His eyes flickered between the two of them for a minute before he jumped off the counter and cleared his throat. "Well, I guess I was wrong. Don't tell Marina I admitted that."

Once he was gone, Ali awkwardly folded her hands and stepped towards the indecipherable man. He stared into the distance, his Adam's apple bobbing.

"So," she murmured, seemingly nervous, as she looked down at his shoes. Her voice was hesitant and sheepish. "Were you lying back there?"

Sawyer took the chance to freely stare at her face for a brief moment before he spoke. "No. I can't lie to you, remember?"

"Well, you would've been lying more to Brady than to me, and it's for the sake of maintaining your image with your father. So it wouldn't violate our deal," Ali pointed out, lifting her head again.

"I know," Sawyer agreed, nodding, as he averted his gaze from her.

She furrowed her eyebrows. "But you still decided to be honest?"

"Yes," he said quietly. "I wanted you to know that I...like being around you too."

"Even though you can't manipulate me?"

"Even though I can't manipulate you."

A bright smile blossomed onto her face, and he swiftly glanced down for a peek at it. It made her smile widen even more, until her cheeks hurt.

She wanted to say more, but a customer appeared at her station a second later. He stepped away from her to attend to them, but she quickly pulled him back. "How about we take care of this one together?"

He nodded, then walked over to the customer with her by his side.

16 - human being

Time flew when they were together.

Although they were occasionally visited by Brady and Marina, along with the whining customers that Sawyer easily soothed, they were mostly alone with each other.

At first, she thought he'd grow tired of her and her constant blabbering, considering it was in her nature to fill the silence whenever she could. Instead, he seemed to be the one who would strike up a conversation whenever *he* could, and listened intently as she rambled out a response.

She knew, deep down, that it was strange of him. He didn't do the same for anyone else; in fact, he practically ignored anyone that wasn't her.

She constantly wondered why, yet as much as she loved to talk, she couldn't seem to get the words out to ask.

"We haven't hung out in a while," Ali remarked as she tidied up her station.

Sawyer watched with dead, yet slightly amused, eyes as she fixed the angle of her computer by a mere degree. "We hang out every day."

She threw him a look. "I meant outside of work."

"Oh," he murmured, his gaze dropping to the floor. "Well, I was thinking of going somewhere this weekend."

"Oh, really? Where?"

"The movie theater."

Her eyebrows rose in surprise, and a curious smile crept onto her face. "I never really had you pegged as a movie buff."

"I'm not."

"Oh?" she cocked her head, urging him to continue. He lifted his gaze as he shifted uncomfortably in front of her.

"But isn't going to the movies a—" Sawyer pursed his lips and shrugged roughly, "—*normal* thing to do?"

The weight of his words sunk into her heart all at once. Her eyes drifted over to the office in the corner of the store, where Mr. Price usually resided, and a frown overtook her face.

Sociopathic or not, she knew having a father that wanted his son to be anything *but* himself was draining. It had to be. She couldn't see it in his emotionless eyes, but she could hear it in his words.

Before she could reply, a loud gasp suddenly tore through the air, drawing their attention to the jaw-slacked customer.

"Oh. My. God. Sawyer Price, is that *you*?" a tall, brown-haired girl with feline-like eyes exclaimed as she squinted at him.

Ali glanced over at him and was surprised to see genuine distaste in his face, which he made no effort to hide. The girl, however, didn't seem to mind.

"It *is* you! It's been—what—two years since we've last seen each other?" she said before blowing out a breath. "Wow, two years. I can't believe it's been that long."

"Not long enough," Sawyer grumbled loudly, making Ali's mouth open in shock, while the girl let out a laugh instead.

"Oh, typical Sawyer," she chuckled before her eyes quickly swept over his figure. She set her bags down on the floor and leaned her elbows on the counter. "So, I see you're still working at your dad's store. Not much has changed with you since high school, huh?"

His voice seemed to become more monotonous than usual. "No."

"And I'm assuming you still haven't been able to get a girlfriend," she added, a pitying smile hanging from her lips.

Sawyer showed no visible reaction to her words, but Ali caught the quick look her way. His Adam's apple bobbed before he uttered out an uninterested: "Yeah."

"Aw, I wonder why. It's not like you're a sociopath or anything," she said, blinking innocently. An awkward silence seemed to hover over them before a sneering laugh escaped from her red lips. "Oh, wait! You are!"

Ali recoiled in surprise, speechless for a moment, while Sawyer merely stared at her. The girl continued to snicker, covering her face with her hand, as Ali tried to process the sudden change in temperature between them.

Once she stopped snickering, Sawyer stepped forward with his usual impassive expression. "Can I help you with anything, Trinity?"

She smirked. "Help *me*? No, Sawyer, you're the one that needs help. Since therapy didn't work for you in high school, I suggest you get a lobotomy! Yeah, it's risky, but I'm sure your dad would be more than willing to try it. After all, it's better to have a son who's a little slow than a sociopath, right?"

"What is wrong with you?" Ali exclaimed, suddenly finding her voice again.

Trinity, startled by the sharp anger in her tone, raised an eyebrow at her. "And who are you?"

"A decent human being, something you're obviously not," Ali snapped as she stepped up to the counter, pushing past Sawyer. "I mean, who the hell says all of that and thinks it's okay?"

"Don't tell me you're defending a *sociopath*," Trinity chuckled, but the blazing fury in Ali's eyes quickly wiped away her smile.

"You know being insensitive and cruel to others are sociopathic traits, right? Considering you just told him to get a *lobotomy*, I'd say you're a little sociopathic yourself," Ali said, plastering on the same pitying smile as Trinity had done to Sawyer.

Trinity gaped at her. "What kind of customer service employee are

you? I should report you!"

"Please do! But you can fill out the form online, because I'd rather get a lobotomy than look at your face any longer. Bye now!" Ali waved cheerfully, and Trinity, wide-eyed with shock, trudged toward the exit.

Once she was gone, Ali sighed heavily and turned back to him. He seemed to be frozen in place, staring directly above her, with an unreadable expression on his face.

"Anyway," she cleared her throat, offering him one of her brightest smiles. "What movie should we watch?"

17 - favorite sound

She never expected that she would one day watch a movie about a psychopath with a sociopath sitting beside her.

Ali glanced over at him as she munched on some popcorn. He was sitting rigidly against the leather seat, with his eyes glued to the large screen across from them. Although he said he didn't enjoy movies much, he seemed to be able to pay attention, but she had a suspicion that it was merely for analytical purposes rather than entertainment.

She also noticed he hadn't eaten any of the popcorn in between them, which they were supposed to share. She narrowed her eyes at him, curious, before returning her attention to the screen.

Once the movie was over, they walked back outside and found themselves at the same pier in which they had first gone out together. The air was chillier than last time, but it didn't bother either of them.

"Did you like the movie?" she asked him as they strolled across the wooden boards that smelled of fish.

"No," he answered honestly, which didn't surprise her at all. "But I thought it was interesting."

"Good enough."

"Did you like it?"

Ali scrunched her nose in thought. "Well, it was definitely realistic. It even got me thinking of what it would be like if *I* knew a psychopath. They're more likely to kill people in extreme cases, while the worst someone like you could do is lie to me. I don't know about you, but I'd rather have you metaphorically stab my back than *actually* do it."

She paused, registering what she just said, and quickly apologized. "Not that you would! I didn't mean to compare you to a serial killer. I promise you're nothing like him, except maybe the way you're both incredibly talented at lying—and you're both attractive—but nothing else!"

They stopped in the middle of the boardwalk as she slowly, once again, registered her own words. Her cheeks burned with embarrassment, and she looked down at the bag of popcorn in her hands.

With her heart pounding, she kept her eyes on the ground and nervously handed him the bag. Her voice was quiet and feeble as she asked: "Popcorn?"

For a moment, he didn't react, and a million different obscenities were shooting through her brain, aimed solely at herself. Then, all of a sudden, an unfamiliar sound—which would soon become her favorite sound—echoed into the sea air and silenced her entire brain for the first time in her life.

He was laughing.

Sawyer was *laughing*.

Ali blinked, watching him with utter awe, as her mind struggled to form any thoughts whatsoever. When he was finished, she swallowed roughly and furrowed her eyebrows at him. "Did you—were you laughing at me just now?"

"Yeah," Sawyer replied nonchalantly, a shadow of a smile still cast over his face.

"You, um..." Ali cleared her throat, feeling a smile take over her own face. "I've never heard you laugh before."

He shrugged. "I haven't laughed in a while."

"I wish you would laugh more."

"Why?"

"Because I like it," she said softly, and he briefly looked over at her.

He didn't respond to that. Instead, his eyes dropped down to the popcorn bag and gently took it from her hands. She watched as he threw a few up into the air and into his mouth, never missing.

"It really doesn't faze you that I'm a sociopath, does it?" Sawyer asked as they began walking again, and she turned to him, taken aback by his question.

"Yeah, it doesn't."

He handed her back the bag as he spoke. "You seem to avoid saying it though. Like it's some sort of bad word."

"Oh," Ali murmured, slightly embarrassed that he had noticed. "I don't mean to. I'm just not too sure if you find it offensive or not."

He looked over at the glistening sea and shrugged. "It's not offensive. It's the truth. I was officially diagnosed with high-functioning, nonviolent antisocial personality disorder when I was 15, but I've been called a sociopath for longer. It's always been my identity."

"There's more to you than that, though," she said firmly, not a single doubt in her tone, and he nodded in silent appreciation.

"Thank you for defending me the other day with Trinity," Sawyer mentioned as he continued to gaze out at the waves. "We went to high school together. She's always said stuff to me like that."

"Well, she won't be saying it anymore. Not while I'm around," Ali assured him. He caught a glimpse of her smile, the one he always looked forward to seeing, then turned back to the blue waters.

"I know," he whispered.

18 - the butterflies

It was a boring day at work, and they were almost the only ones in the store.

A town holiday, that she hadn't heard of until last week, would be taking place all day. Considering most local customers celebrated the holiday and stayed home, majority of the store's employees also had the privilege of taking the day off.

Since Ali both needed the money and didn't care much for the holiday, she decided to work. As for Sawyer, he simply showed up out of boredom.

Ali held her phone above her face as she scrolled through social media. She crossed her feet and began humming a vague tune that echoed throughout the empty store.

Sawyer, who was sitting on a chair all the way on the other side of the counter, suddenly stood and craned his neck to peek at the entrance. "I think someone's coming."

"Finally," she huffed as she sat up from the counter and swung her legs to the side. A bell rang as the customer entered; Ali waved enthusiastically from across the store.

"Hi, welcome! If you need any help, please don't hes—"

"Can I just use your bathroom?" the lady asked, smiling awkwardly.

Ali sighed and gestured toward the restrooms. "All the way down to your left."

"Thank you!" she exclaimed before quickly wobbling in the given direction.

"My pleasure," Ali mumbled as she laid back down across the counter. She stared at the ceiling for a moment, blowing out a long breath, then turned her head to look at him.

His eyes swiftly shot down to the ground, missing hers by a millisecond. A small smile grew onto her lips as she gazed at his tall figure, slumped against the plastic chair. His dark hair glistened in the cheap lighting of the department store, and she wondered if it felt as soft as it looked.

Ali cleared her throat. "Are you bored too?"

"Yes."

"Let's do something then," she said as her eyes wandered off on its own. Once a thought came to mind, she flipped onto her stomach excitedly and unlocked her phone. "Okay, let's do a sociopath quiz and compare results. I'll go first."

Sawyer watched her curiously as she scrolled through her phone, her feet swinging slightly in the air. Once she was finished, she turned to him and smiled. "Your turn. I'll read the questions out loud and you say yes or no, cool?"

He nodded.

"First question: are you superficially charming and intelligent?"

"Yes."

"Do you have delusions or other signs of irrational thinking?"

"No."

"Are you generally reliable?"

"No."

"Do you regularly tell lies or say insincere things?"

"Yes," Sawyer said, then paused. "Unless you're Alice."

She smiled. "Do you feel remorse or shame?"

"Yes, but not often."

"Is your behavior antisocial for no good reason?"

"Yes."

"Do you experience emotions like most other people do?"

"No."

"Do you often have to fake your actions and responses to others?" Alice asked, but chose an answer before he even responded.

"Yes."

"Does your partying behavior get out of hand?"

Sawyer blinked. "I don't even go to parties."

"Me neither," Ali chuckled, then cleared her throat loudly. "Okay, last question! Do you feel that you're incapable of love?"

"Y—" Sawyer started, but the word seemed to get caught in his throat. She glanced over at him as he stood from his chair and stuffed his hands in his pockets.

When he still didn't respond, she raised an eyebrow at him. "Tough question?"

"Yeah," he muttered. "I don't know."

"Well, have you ever felt the butterflies in your stomach? Or felt like your heart was going to beat out of your chest because of someone?" Ali asked, and although she didn't realize it, that mere question made him feel all of those things at once. Because it came out of *her* mouth.

She looked back down at her phone as she received a notification, and his eyes immediately fell onto her. He gazed at her, feeling his heart pound at every inch of her face, and the answer became clear.

"No," Sawyer said quietly. "I think I'm capable."

Ali smiled at him, averting her eyes from her phone. "So you've been in love before?"

"Not yet."

"Solid answer," she nodded, then sat herself up on the counter. She was oblivious to the way his eyes swept over her, like he didn't want to forget how she looked every second he was with her.

She then inhaled deeply, puffing out her chest, and tapped the submit button. "Let's see our results! Here, you look at them first."

She handed him her phone, and he skimmed over it blankly before his eyes widened. "You'll never believe this, Alice."

"What, what?"

"You're...you're..." Sawyer paused dramatically. "You're not a sociopath."

Her face dropped, out of lack of surprise rather than disappointment. "Oh. What about you?"

"Still a sociopath. The only thing that's changed is that I'm Buzzfeed-certified now."

"Shut up," Ali laughed and playfully pushed against his shoulder, having done so almost instinctively. Taken aback by her unexpected touch, he seemed to stand there for a moment, while she became distracted with her phone again.

Sawyer slowly turned his back to her and put his hand over his stomach, swallowing harshly.

Butterflies.

19 - bye, son

The day had finally come, the day she had been dreading for weeks.

Mr. Price was leaving.

Ali played with the hem of her shirt anxiously and watched as the towering man smiled at his employees. He always wore an intimidating suit, like a true businessman, while managing to look genuinely friendly as well.

"Thank you all for your hard work, and as always, I'm very pleased with this store's continuous success. Great job," Mr. Price announced brightly before turning to the red-headed assistant manager. "It's been great seeing you again, Marina. Expect big things to come your way the next time I visit."

Marina's eyes widened in excitement. "Really, Sir? You don't mean..."

"Manager Marina. How does that sound to you?"

"Like heaven, Sir!" she exclaimed, clutching her hands together dreamily, and he smiled in amusement.

"Until then," Mr. Price said, shaking her hand as a farewell.

Marina then walked off, teary-eyed, and sighed happily as she leaned on Brady's cash register. He tried to push her off, but she ignored him. "Did you hear what Mr. Price said to me, Brady? I feel like my heart's going to explode!"

"You act like he *proposed* to you," Brady scoffed, and she glared at him.

"In a strictly professional way, he kind of did!"

"In a strictly professional way, you're kind of delusional!" Brady quipped, but before she could respond, his eyes caught sight of

something behind her. He quickly turned her around. "Look! Mr. Price is talking to Ali and Sawyer."

Ali, now gripping the hem of her shirt, briefly glanced over at her two nosy coworkers from across the store. They offered her supportive smiles before she turned back to the businessman before her.

"Marina has told me all about you, Ali," Mr. Price said with a warm smile, but something told her he didn't just mean that from a professional standpoint. "She's told me you're an exceptional worker in both customer service and at the cash register, even with your extra shifts. I'm glad to have you on the team."

"Thank you, Mr. Price. That means a lot," she said, a light shade of pink coloring her cheeks.

"Of course," he nodded before his eyes met with his younger lookalike. His kind smile seemed to falter upon looking at him, while his son stared at him blankly.

Ali looked up at Sawyer, who stood beside her with his hands deep in his pockets, and wondered what thoughts were floating across his mind. She felt an urge to reach for his hand, to hold it tightly, but she restrained herself.

Mr. Price cleared his throat. "I have to admit, I was a bit surprised to hear about your friendship with my son."

Although he was speaking to Ali, his eyes never left Sawyer's, and she felt extremely out of place. She rubbed her hands as she looked between them. "Um, yeah, we're good friends."

"Hm," Mr. Price rumbled, then raised an eyebrow at him. "Is that true, son?"

"Yes," Sawyer replied instantly, and his father narrowed his eyes at him. His lack of hesitation was suspicious, but his father knew it was impossible to tell if he was lying or not. Even Ali was skeptical, or perhaps that was simply her own insecurities talking.

"Well, keep up the great work, Ali," Mr. Price said, meeting her eyes

again and tossing her a smile. When he turned to his son, his smile remained this time, yet it still lacked sincerity. "Bye, son."

The two of them watched silently as he left the store. Ali nibbled on the inside of her cheek, her nerves going haywire, while Sawyer gazed at the entrance like he still felt his father's presence gnawing at him.

Brady's words from weeks ago, before their deal, echoed in her mind like a broken record. "*After all, Sawyer Price isn't the type of person to make friends or hang out with anyone for long periods of time. He probably won't talk to you again unless he's forced to.*"

She felt her heart clench. With his father gone, did he no longer need her?

"Alice," a voice called, but she could barely hear them. Then, ever so gently, something touched her hand, and she blinked, returning to reality. "Alice, are you okay?"

Ali looked up at him, and her eyes slowly trailed down to his hand on hers. When he was about to pull away, she faced him fully and tightened her grip on his hand. He felt the urgency in her touch; his eyes hastily flickered down to look at her emotional orbs.

"Sawyer," she murmured quietly, her voice almost fearful. "I need to know..."

He held his breath, trying to slow his turbulent heartbeat. Her tone was so timid, yet so tender at the same time.

"Since your dad is gone, there's no need for our deal anymore. So does that mean we're not—or you don't really...need me?" Ali questioned, gazing up at his face with an intensity and softness that made him lose all composure.

Sawyer gulped, using everything in him to mask his vulnerability, and looked down at their hands. Deal or not, he still felt inclined to tell her the truth. "No. I still need you, Alice. I... really need you."

Her face immediately brightened, like fireworks igniting the sky, and he couldn't help but admire it. She squeezed his hand, wearing

perhaps her biggest smile yet. "Thank God."

A small smile crept onto his face at that.

20 - open book

It had been more than a week since Mr. Price left, and all was good, perhaps even better.

Without his father around and the mental burden that came with him, they seemed to have gotten even closer.

They were more open with each other, now that they both knew their relationship was never artificial. In the beginning it may have been a bit forced, but nothing they ever said or felt was a lie. That, in itself, gave them peace of mind and security in themselves—and in each other.

Ali sat on the counter, her legs dangling, as Sawyer stood beside her. They were always smiling when they were together; even Sawyer couldn't help but give a sheepish grin once in a while.

Marina and Brady watched them from the checkout section, their eyes narrowed. She quirked an eyebrow when Ali casually leaned her head on Sawyer's shoulder, who was constantly stealing glances at her with an unusual look on his face.

Marina crossed her arms skeptically. "What do you think they're saying?"

"Something along the lines of: 'Hark! Dear Alice, you are the apple of my eye. Oh, how I yearn to take a bite of you!' And she's probably thinking how romantic he is, but he's really just hungry," Brady re-enacted dramatically with his tie-dye colored lollipop swirling in his mouth. She tried to snatch it from him, but he swiftly dodged her hands.

"How do you not have cavities by now?" Marina asked in exasperation, and he shrugged.

"I'm blessed by the lollipop gods, obviously."

She sighed, turning back to Ali and Sawyer. "Please stop talking."

Brady grinned cheekily at her, then watched as Sawyer helped Ali hop off the counter. The lollipop fanatic noticed the way he held onto her hands afterwards, not wanting to let go just yet.

"Permission to speak?" Brady whispered; Marina grudgingly nodded. "Okay, so you have to admit, they're kind of...cute."

"You think so?"

He put the lollipop to his lips as he stared at the couple pensively. "I mean, describing Sawyer as happy might be a stretch, but I've never seen him smile this much without it seeming like he's forcing it."

"His smiles do look more natural with her, don't they?" she murmured, and he nodded in agreement. Marina then began to study Ali, who was much more of an open book.

Ali had always looked interested and curious when she was talking to him, but now there was something else there too. It gleamed in her irises every time: the tender fondness she held for him. It was like his presence not only excited her, but comforted her. Like when she looked at him, she somehow saw more—more than the eye could see—and she loved every bit of it.

What Marina admired the most about her was how she unapologetically showed her feelings to everyone and anyone, instead of hiding them behind a mask. She was never embarrassed of how she felt or what she felt, even when she felt these things about a sociopath.

"I just hope someone's heart doesn't end up breaking," Marina sighed as Ali's sweet laugh sounded throughout the store.

Brady threw his headless lollipop stick in the trash, keeping his eyes on Sawyer, who visibly brightened at hearing her laugh. Brady blew out a breath and patted his supervisor's shoulder. "Me too, boss. Me too."

21 - accidental success

Today, she was on a mission. A *secret* mission.

She had invited him to go to the fair that their town was sponsoring, and he had reluctantly agreed. Originally, she simply wanted to go with him for fun, but now she had a plan.

"Operation Make Eye Contact With Sawyer."

"What did you say, Alice?" Sawyer asked, and she quickly tossed him a bright smile.

"Nothing! Oh, look, let's go play the balloon pop game," she said hastily before dragging him to the booth. He handed the man a ticket to play, then grabbed his first dart.

"You got this, Sawyer!" Ali exclaimed confidently.

He threw the dart. He missed.

"It's okay, you'll most definitely get the next one!"

He sighed and threw another. An excited squeal escaped from her mouth when the balloon popped, and he glanced over at her as she jumped happily. A small smile hung from his lips, amused, before he handed her the last dart. "Here, you got this one."

Ali took the dart and blew out a long, dramatic breath. She stepped back, her eyes concentrating on the pink balloon in the middle, then launched her arm forward.

Pop!

"Yes!" she shouted before turning to him. "High five, Sawyer!"

He lifted his hands and somehow hit hers without even looking. She frowned and watched as he took their prize from the man at the booth.

Attempt one: failed.

Her eyes searched for another opportunity, and a wide smile blossomed onto her face when she did. She pulled him over to another booth, making him almost drop their stuffed animal prize in the process, and quickly gave away a ticket.

"Okay," Ali breathed, barely able to contain her excitement. "Turn around, I need to blindfold you for this game."

Sawyer scrunched his eyebrows as he looked over the name of the booth. "Pin the tail on the donkey?"

"Yes, let's see if you can do it," she said before tying the black cloth over his eyes. She slowly guided him to the board with the cartoon donkey drawn on it, then spinned him around a few times. "Ready?"

"No."

"Good. Go ahead!"

Sawyer warily stepped forward and stretched out his hand, holding the so-called tail. She glanced around, seeing that no one was looking, and silently tiptoed to the board. As he took his final step forward, she managed to slide in between him and the board.

Ali held her breath as he slowly stuck the tail onto her forehead. He cocked his head, unsure. "Did I do it?"

Instead of replying, she gently untied his blindfold and waited for the moment they locked eyes. Her heart pounded; she couldn't believe it was finally happening.

Ali's lips parted in surprise when he turned around immediately after she removed the blindfold. She blinked, confused, as he stood with his back towards her.

"You don't make a great donkey," Sawyer remarked casually. "Your shoes are far too squeaky."

She never seemed to remember how unpredictable he was. She glared down at her sneakers and ripped off the tail from her

forehead.

Attempt two: failed.

Out of ideas, Ali grudgingly accepted her defeat and spent the rest of the day strolling around with him. They went on the ferris wheel, where he sat too close to the edge, and ate at the wooden benches, where she had too much funnel cake.

When the sun began to set, the two went to their usual pier and walked side by side to the end. She watched as he leaned over the wooden rail, gazing at the dark waters. She, too, looked down and momentarily caught his eye in their reflections.

She cracked a smile. This was the most she would get out of him, and that was okay.

"Do you ever get an urge to jump in there?" Sawyer suddenly asked her, and she quirked an eyebrow at him.

"In where? The ocean?"

"Yeah," he nodded. "For fun."

Ali chuckled and took his hand in hers, partly due to the fear that he would actually jump into the cold water and partly because she simply wanted to. "Sure. But let's not do that today because one, there are sharks, and two, it's probably forty degrees down there."

"That's what makes it fun," he said flatly; she tightened her grip on his hand a little more at that. The gesture didn't go unnoticed, and he briefly glanced over at her in his peripheral vision. "Impulsivity and a disregard for one's own safety are traits of sociopathy, Alice. But don't worry, I won't do it. For you."

Her cheeks burned slightly at his words, but she still had her wit. "Oh, but let me guess, you'll most definitely be doing it in your free time?"

"I don't know the future," he shrugged innocently, and she smiled.

After a moment, he turned away from the ocean and leaned his

back against the wooden rails. When she turned to look at him, she almost felt her heartbeat tremble.

The faint, early moonlight shined across his skin beautifully, and his black hair moved with the light breeze. But his eyes, as always, were what she loved the most as they lit up like the stars in the dark. All of her self control seemed to diminish in a matter of seconds upon looking at him, and she suddenly found herself acting without thinking.

"Sawyer," she said quietly, taking both of his hands in hers now. "Can you...close your eyes for a second?"

He blinked. "Why?"

"Can you just..." she trailed off, lacking a concrete reason, and he hesitated. His instincts were seeing this as a test, like any other social situation, but he pushed the thought away for once.

"Okay," he murmured before closing his eyes. Ali stood there for a minute, holding his hands tightly, and gazed at him as her breaths began to grow shallow.

She didn't know what she was doing, but she somehow didn't want to stop herself either. And perhaps it was the way his thumbs were purposefully rubbing her hand, softly and tenderly, or the way she felt like she was being pulled to him every passing second—but it drove her to do the unforeseeable.

Ali dropped his hands and cupped his face all in the same second. Then, before he could react to the change, her lips softly met his, and she closed her eyes. She stood on her tippy-toes, her heart racing with thrill and fear.

She pulled her head back, keeping her hands on his cheeks, and opened her eyes again. She wasn't sure what she was expecting, but nothing could have prepared her for what she saw.

Sawyer was looking at her.

Straight into her eyes.

With every emotion swirling in his irises for all to see.

Ali fell silent as she forced herself not to blink, wanting to gaze into his eyes for as long as she could. But the moment lasted for barely a minute, as he slid his hands around her waist and desperately dipped down to meet her lips once more.

When they pulled apart again, Sawyer stared into her eyes like he had finally found the meaning of life in them, like he saw something more—just as she did with him.

Attempt three: an accidental success.

22 - new beginning

Ali chewed on the inside of her cheek, feeling her stomach churn with anxiety.

She hadn't spoken to or seen Sawyer since last weekend at the fair, and she was drowning in worry ever since she woke up for work today. She had clocked in earlier than usual, hoping that she would be able to calm herself before he arrived.

"City girl, you good?" Brady questioned as he came up to the customer service counter.

She nodded vigorously. "I'm good, I'm great. Fantastic. Yes."

"Okay..." he drawled suspiciously, then lifted up a small cardboard box from the ground and plopped it down on the counter. "Anyway, since you're here early, would you mind taking this to the back room? They're just extra products that didn't fit on the shelves, and I don't feel like—"

"Yes, I'll do it," Ali interjected as she quickly took the cardboard box, grateful for the distraction.

Brady grinned. "Great! You can put it anywhere it fits in the back, but make sure you tape it closed first. I would've done it myself, but I used all of the tape at my station to make a trap for Marina. Trust me, it'll be worth it."

"Okay, I'll do it right now," Ali muttered as she put the box down and grabbed a roll of tape by her computer. Brady walked back to his cash register with a mischievous smile, envisioning Marina's reaction to his prank in his head.

Once the box was secure, she blew out a breath and turned around to head towards the back room. She was only able to take one step forward before she collided with a hard chest that seemed to materialize out of nowhere. The box dropped to the floor with a

loud thud, and she looked up at the culprit.

Her eyes widened, her heart hammered, and she instantly averted her gaze. She pursed her lips and swallowed roughly. "Um, sorry, I didn't see you."

"It's okay," Sawyer replied calmly.

Ali inhaled shakily, speechless for once, then awkwardly crouched down to lift up the box. He, too, lowered to the ground and grabbed the other side for her.

Then she froze.

All of her muscles seemed to go weak as the unexpected happened once more.

Sawyer was looking at her. Into her eyes. *Again.*

Her heart warmed, but fear was still bubbling inside of her. Did he regret what happened at the fair? Was it too much, too fast? Did he not like her that way?

Her mind was overflowing with questions, yet she couldn't seem to get one word out. He was still as inscrutable as ever, but little did she know, he couldn't read her either.

They remained there, crouching down on the ground, for a moment. None of the other customer service employees had clocked in yet, and the counter hid them from any wandering eyes.

It was just them.

Just like that night.

Sawyer gazed at every inch of her face, feeling almost relieved that he could look at her so freely and openly now. But he didn't want to simply look at her anymore.

"Alice," he whispered lowly, his voice sending chills down her spine.

"Yes?" she whispered back.

"Can I..." Sawyer hesitated, desperately searching her eyes for any hint of what she was feeling. But he had to ask; he had to know. "Can I kiss you?"

Her breath got caught in her throat, taken aback by his question, but her response was immediate. "Yes."

A small smile crept onto his face, and he slowly leaned over the box in between them. His hand gently cupped her cheek, electricity springing from the warmth of her skin, before his lips met hers with both a tender familiarity and a foreign urgency.

All of her doubts seemed to melt away like snow in the summery sun as they deepened the kiss. It was obvious now, to both of them.

They wanted this. They wanted each other. But it was more than a physical craving, as shown from the way their hearts pounded to a beat that was almost musical.

When they pulled away, he leaned his forehead against hers as his thumb slowly stroked her jawline. She smiled and lifted her hand up to his, looking up into his dark eyes.

"Hi," she whispered quietly.

He pecked her nose and returned the smile. "Hi."

A new beginning.

23 - budding romance

a/n: guys... this story was *#3 in humor* yesterday! this is my first time having such a high rank in the humor category, i'm beyond amazed. thank you so much, my characters and i love you all! back to the story—

After their second kiss, the world seemed to shift beneath their feet.

They were already close before, but it was different now. Stronger. She was almost like a moth to his flame, and he to hers.

She noticed the way he seemed more comfortable around her, physically. He didn't mind when they sat a bit too close to each other with their legs touching and their feet tangled together. Sometimes, when she least expected it, he would reach for her hand and gently play with her fingers.

It made her heart soar, for him to be so openly affectionate with her. She knew it was foreign to him, how outlandish he might've felt at first, but she appreciated the effort.

Whenever they were alone, she would show her appreciation by stealing a kiss, which always made a smile spring onto his face. She was so addicted to his smiles, constantly yearning to see another, while he was addicted to her eyes, which always seemed to shine like a constellation in the sky.

Although they kept their kisses hidden, their budding romance was hard to disguise, especially from certain local gossipers.

Brady squinted at the customer service section as he bagged groceries absentmindedly. The customer watched his slow, distracted movements with a frown before letting out a sharp breath.

"Oh, this is why self-checkout is better! Give me that!" they huffed

impatiently before grabbing the milk carton from his hands and wobbling away to the machines.

Marina, who had watched the situation transpire from afar, quickly scuttled across the store and stopped in front of him. "Okay, Brady, that's it. This has been going on for far too long. It's finally time for you to go."

"Right," Brady murmured, nodding along, as he continued staring beyond her.

"Hello? I'm firing you right now, Brady, pay attention!" Marina said, snapping her fingers in his face.

"Marina," Brady whispered, ignoring what she said, and slowly pointed behind her. She grudgingly turned around and crossed her arms, before her eyes widened in shock.

Sawyer was speaking to a customer from behind the counter, wearing his usual friendly facade, and Ali stood behind him. Nothing out of the ordinary could be seen, but from the cashiers, they saw the truth.

Sawyer's hands were twisted behind his back, and Ali's hand was loosely knitted with his. An impressed smile grew onto Brady's face when he saw the sociopath's other hand trail his fingers across her arm.

"Oh, wow," Marina breathed, taken aback by the unexpected display of affection.

Brady smirked at her. "You wish that was you, huh?"

"What?" Marina turned to him with a scowl. "No, sociopaths aren't my type!"

"You certainly like their fathers, though," Brady muttered under his breath as he faked a cough, and she glared at him.

"Shut up. Just tell me what you know about them. Are they dating?"

"I don't know anything. City girl's been radio silent," Brady shrugged as he rested his arms on the counter. She frowned, ridden with curiosity, and turned back to the couple.

Yet another pleased customer left their station while the two lovebirds tossed each other a smile. Sawyer untangled his arms from his back, then pulled her over to the chairs in the corner. They sat beside each other and began talking, keeping their hands apart, but their feet discreetly woven together.

Brady and Marina exchanged looks.

"Yeah, they're definitely dating," Brady said as he materialized a cotton candy lollipop, and she nodded. "I guess city people are into the loopy ones."

Marina narrowed her eyes at Sawyer, who was gazing at Ali with a smitten smile, as she spoke. "And I guess the loopy ones have a heart too."

24 - a supernova

a/n: now this book is *#7 in teen fiction* ! i have never been so high up in that genre either; i'm so speechless. here's a longer chapter as a thank you! back to the story—

They went on their first official date that weekend.

He had suggested a fancy restaurant at first, thinking that was the most socially acceptable option, but she kindly shot him down. To his surprise, she wanted to have a simple picnic in the park instead, now that it was growing warmer. He, of course, went along without a second thought; as long as they were together, he didn't care where they went.

She was in charge of bringing the meal, while he brought the dessert and drinks. He had spent an hour googling potential picnic foods, and he hoped he wouldn't disappoint her.

They walked hand in hand as they searched for a good spot in the park. She held a wicker basket in her other hand, while he carried a small cooler.

A bright smile lept onto her face as she pointed towards a comfortable spot near a large tree. They stood there awkwardly for a moment, and she peered up at him, raising an eyebrow. "What, you didn't bring the blanket?"

"A blanket?" Sawyer blinked. "No, I didn't know I was supposed to. I can go buy one really quickly—"

"I'm kidding, Sawyer. I brought one," Ali chuckled as she pulled out the checkered picnic blanket from her basket. Relief washed over him, and he realized how nervous he suddenly was around her.

While she stretched out the blanket perfectly, he looked around the nearly empty park, with only a few people jogging or walking

their dogs. The weather was cool and refreshing with the occasional breeze that made the tree leaves rustle above them.

"Okay, come on, sit," she said excitedly, plopping down on the blanket with her legs crossed. He sat across from her, setting his cooler down beside him, and watched her enthusiasm practically spill from her pores. "Time for the reveal! Are you excited?"

He smiled in amusement. "Very."

Her eyes gleamed at his response. She began pulling out each of the entrees, organizing them across the blanket, while he listened intently as she explained. "So since we're not posh 40 year olds or epicures, I thought it was better to keep it simple. Hence the BLT sandwiches that I know you love, the pretzels, and the small fruit platter. What do you think?"

"It's perfect," he said honestly, and she grinned.

"What did you bring?"

Sawyer hesitated, anxiety gnawing at his insides, but he forcibly swallowed down the foreign feeling. Slowly and wordlessly, he opened up the cooler and placed everything in front of him, keeping his eyes down.

Once he was done, he briefly glanced up at her, then quickly averted his gaze. She noticed his unwonted shyness, feeling a sense of déjà vu, and smiled tenderly at the memory.

She looked down at what he brought, her eyes floating over the green sparkling apple cider bottle, to the macaroons, to the chocolate covered strawberries. She cocked her head curiously. "Did you make the strawberries yourself?"

He nodded. She beamed as she imagined him working away in the kitchen with chocolate all over his fingers.

"Do you like it?" he asked reluctantly.

Ali's face softened upon hearing the faint insecurity in his tone, and she carefully leaned over the food to cup his cheeks. Her hands

gently traced his jawline until his stormy eyes met her hazel ones. She smiled, the type of smile that made the colors in her irises dance like flames.

His shoulders fell as he felt himself drown in her gaze. Then, ever so slowly, she tilted her head and leaned down to meet his lips. He almost felt the need to sigh dreamily as she kissed him with the most passion and affection he had ever experienced. It was like a supernova exploded between their mouths, bursting with astronomically strong emotion. When they parted, he almost thought he saw colors that were yet to be discovered.

"I love it," Ali whispered softly, her eyes glistening with intensity. "Thank you, Sawyer. You make me feel so special."

Sawyer gave her a small smile, lifting his hand to touch her cheek lovingly. His voice was quiet, but she heard him loud and clear. "You make me feel normal."

Her eyes watered slightly at his words, knowing how much that meant to him, and she pressed a sweet kiss to his lips in response.

"We should probably start eating this food now, huh?" she remarked, and he chuckled lightly.

"I was starting to think it was all for decoration."

Ali laughed brightly before she handed him a sandwich. They ate most of the food as they chatted about anything that came to mind. By the time the sun was setting, they were sprawled across the blanket together with full stomachs.

She snuggled closer to him, leaning her head on his chest as he gently played with her caramel-colored hair. She tilted her head to look at him while he stared up at the sky in thought.

"Sawyer, is this too much for you?" she suddenly asked, drawing his attention as easily as gravity pulled a ball down. "All this hugging and kissing and being so close, is it too much? Do you need us to slow down? I don't mind if you do."

He gazed down at her for a moment, taking the time to genuinely

consider the question. His fingers continued combing through her hair, which made her heart hammer wildly, before he reached a decision.

"No," he answered simply.

Ali couldn't resist the amused smile that surfaced on her lips. "No?"

"No," Sawyer repeated, glancing at his finger as he curled a strand of her hair. "This isn't too much for me. I thought it would be too, but it's not."

"Why's that?"

He shifted his gaze back to her face—a face he had grown so inexplicably attached to, that he didn't want to waste another second not looking directly at her ever again.

"I don't know," he finally replied, and she tossed him a kind smile.

"That's okay."

"Yeah," he breathed out before a calm sigh escaped from his lips. She shifted her body, then rested her head on the middle of his chest. She listened to his heartbeat as she grabbed his other hand and traced random shapes on his palm. When his heartbeat began to quicken, she grinned and pressed a small kiss on the palm of his hand.

Sawyer turned to the side and stared into her sparkling eyes. He pecked her nose, then watched as she scrunched her nose and smiled. He loved every little thing she did.

He tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear and gifted her a smile of his own. "Let's do this again soon."

25 - blunt brady

[image]

a/n: don't skip this note!

let's do a quick mini vote: should i keep the current cover or replace it with the picture above? comment your answer, please and thank you! back to the story—

Ali scrutinized herself in the mirror as she washed her hands. She used the automatic hand dryer instead of the paper towels, then returned to the mirror to quickly fix her hair.

As soon as she stepped out of the bathroom, she came face to face with a lollipop.

"You want one?" Brady asked as he held it up in front of her.

She blinked, then slowly shook her head in amusement. "I'm good. Thank you, though."

"Your loss," he muttered before unwrapping the Christmas-themed lollipop and sticking it into his mouth. She turned to leave, but he hastily stopped her, stretching out his arm like police tape. He tossed her a toothy grin with the lollipop lodged in the corner of his mouth. "Hey, hold on, city girl. We need to catch up!"

"Do you just never work?"

He waved his hand dismissively. "That's irrelevant."

"Okay, Brady," Ali sighed as she leaned her shoulder against the wall, crossing her arms. She raised her eyebrows at him. "So how have you been? Nice to see that you haven't been fired yet."

"Not for lack of trying, on Marina's part. But everything's good, I bought ten more packs of lollipops and my hair's been shiny as hell lately. You see it?" he said as he fluffed up his hair, and she chuckled.

"I actually do."

Brady nodded. "Of course you do. But anyway, enough about me! What's new with you?"

"Hm, let's see," she murmured, narrowing her eyes pensively. "Well, I did some shopping the other day with my grandma, and I got a couple good deals. Um, I had a movie marathon too, which is always fun."

He blinked, not the least bit impressed, and quirked a skeptical eyebrow at her. "That's it?"

"Pretty much," she replied, shrugging.

Brady hesitated for a moment, contemplating whether or not he should be more straightforward. Fortunately, just as he was about to open his mouth, Marina appeared with her trademark tablet in hand. Her copper red hair flew in his face as she stood in front of him, facing Ali with a bright smile.

"Ali! How are you? I've been meaning to check on you."

"I'm great, how are you, Marina?" Ali said absently, fighting back a laugh while Brady grimaced in disgust as he pulled a red strand of hair from his face.

"Good as well. Anything new happen with you lately or—"

"I already asked her that. Catch up," Brady interjected as he stepped forward, and Marina shot him an icy glare.

"Well, I meant something we should particularly know," Marina clarified, raising her eyebrows suggestively at her oblivious coworker. "Or maybe *someone* we should know about."

Ali remained none the wiser, and after three seconds of silence, Brady let out a frustrated groan.

"We want to know if you're dating Sawyer or not," he blurted out, and her eyes widened in understanding.

Marina sighed. "Blunt Brady strikes again."

Ali pursed her lips, uncertain of how to answer their question. Her eyes drifted over to customer support, where the subject of the matter stood idly as he scrolled through his phone, and she felt a smile crawl onto her face upon seeing him. She watched as he ran his fingers through his jet black hair and let out a yawn. If not for the two nosy coworkers staring holes into her head, she would've let herself look at him for a little while longer.

"I don't know yet, to be honest," Ali finally replied, and their shoulders slumped in disappointment. She then furrowed her eyebrows as a thought came to mind. "Wait, what made you ask that?"

"You two seemed to be getting cozy. I could feel the tension from the cash register," Brady answered dramatically, and she let out a breath of relief.

"Okay, good. I thought you saw us—" she paused, promptly closing her mouth in embarrassment, and they immediately cocked their heads.

"What? You thought I saw *what*, Ali?" Brady questioned intensely; Marina nodded vigorously.

Ali's cheeks flushed, remembering the many secret kisses in the back room. "Nothing! Don't worry about it."

"Come on—"

"Huh? I'm coming!" Ali exclaimed to the imaginary voice before she scurried away to customer support, ignoring their calls of objection.

Brady pouted, the lollipop stick protruding from his lips, and turned to his supervisor in annoyance. "This is going to bother me all day. I probably won't be able to fall asleep tonight either."

"You've fallen asleep in the middle of bagging groceries while I shouted at you. I'm sure you'll be just fine," Marina quipped before yanking the lollipop out of his mouth. This time, she was met with

some resistance as he bit down on the stick, and after a few unsuccessful pulls, she sighed in defeat. He watched her walk away with a grin, swirling the lollipop around his mouth happily.

He glanced at customer service one last time, narrowing his eyes at the couple as they beamed at each other nonstop, before grudgingly dragging himself to his cash register.

26 - the memories

[image]

a/n: above was the previous cover before you guys voted for the current one last chapter! posting it here for all that were curious.

Throughout the week, their attachment only grew as they spent more and more time together.

Sawyer had sped up his fail-safe process of consoling customers, while Ali continued honing her own skills. She used a different approach than him, relying on her authenticity rather than her deceitfulness, mostly because she was a horrible liar.

When he was done with his customer, he would usually watch her from afar for a few minutes, analyzing whether her technique was working or not. He would momentarily become distracted by her smile or her laugh or things alike, before stepping in to help her.

On the more peaceful days, they were able to sit together at their station and talk without any interruptions by griping customers. It was strange for him to be able to hold a conversation for so long; it was perhaps even stranger that he actually *wanted* it to last.

She, on the other hand, was very prudent with how much they interacted. She tried not to force conversations on him, or any physical contact either. She respected his boundaries and attempted to make him as comfortable as possible, although he was always content around her.

After work one day, they visited a local cafe for a small snack. She ordered a hot chocolate and a pain au chocolat, while he simply went with pressed juice and a croissant.

He stared at her pastry, cocking his head curiously. She peered up at him as she took a bite and smiled. "Have you never had a pain au

chocolat before?"

"No, what is it?"

"It's basically a chocolate croissant. You want to try it? I don't mind," she offered, and he hesitated for a moment. His eyes flickered up to hers—which never seemed to lack that gleaming enthusiasm—before he caved in.

Sawyer took a bite, then nodded. "I like it. I'll get it next time."

"We'll be pastry pals," Ali grinned, then chuckled at her own cheesiness. His lips curled up in amusement as he gulped down some of his juice. She glanced out the window, spotting a couple walking hand in hand with their child, and turned back to him. "Hey, tell me more about your family. I really only know about your dad, kind of."

"I have a pretty big family. Lots of cousins, aunts, and uncles, but I haven't seen them since I was a child. Ever since my mother died, my dad has been the only relative I talk to," Sawyer said, his voice void of emotion as usual, and her face softened at the mention of his mother.

"What was your mom like?"

A shadow of a smile appeared on his face as the memories flashed in his mind. "She was small, but loud. Her laughs could be heard from doors away, yet nobody ever found her obnoxious. I remember she could spark up a conversation with anyone and have them smiling within seconds. My dad said she was his own little sun. She'd call me her little star."

"She sounds beautiful. I can imagine her in my head," Ali murmured as his eyes slowly drifted back to her. He exhaled through his nose, then silently ate his croissant for a moment.

"She died when I was ten. It was a brain aneurysm, and she was alone at home when it happened. I remember it was the first time I've ever seen my dad cry," Sawyer told her quietly, then sighed. His gaze dropped down to his plate, which looked as empty as he felt.

"I've come to terms with her death by now, but I still..."

"Miss her?" she suggested, and he glanced up at her, nodding.

"Yeah. I miss her."

She opened her mouth to try to comfort him, but promptly closed it. As she stared at the faint heartbroken expression cast over his face, she decided that it was best to let him feel.

A wave of silence rolled over them, with only the indistinct chattering of the cafe customers filling the air, until he cleared his throat. He met her eyes, sending jolts to each of their hearts as if it was the first day he looked at her all over again.

"How about your family?" he asked, causing a bright smile to creep onto her face. With him, she always knew that he truly cared about what she told him, otherwise he simply wouldn't bother asking.

Ali sat back in her seat and shrugged. "My family's pretty small, in comparison. I'm not too close with either of my parents, never have been. My mom left my dad and I when I was younger, and he was too busy working all the time to take care of me. I was raised by my grandmother instead, my dad's mom."

"You moved out here to take care of her, right?" Sawyer questioned, and she nodded, touched that he had remembered. He cocked his head in his usual emotionless puppy-dog way. "Do you talk to either of your parents regularly?"

"I've been texting my dad every week to give him updates on his mom, and he asks me how I'm doing once in a while. As for my mom, she sends me a postcard every year on my birthday, and sometimes she'll even call. But that's usually only once or twice a year," she explained nonchalantly, while he listened intently with his eyes narrowed slightly in concentration.

"Does that make you feel...sad?"

Taken aback by the question, she hesitated for a moment. She looked down at her hands as she tucked them in between her

thighs, then blew out a small breath. "I don't know. I've kind of always accepted everything that happened, and just kept moving forward. I do wonder what it would've been like if things were different, but my childhood wasn't too bad. My grandma was always there for me, and that was enough, you know?"

"No," he answered, and she paused before a quiet chuckle escaped from her lips. A smile found its way onto his own face upon seeing her brighten up.

She froze when he suddenly reached across the small table and took hold of her hand. She liked the contrasting coldness of his fingers as they slowly interlaced with her warm ones. He gazed deep into her irises the entire time, in a way that almost made her blush.

He seemed like he wanted to say something, but as the seconds passed by, she realized that he was struggling to find the words. She offered him a tender smile and squeezed his hand, hoping that he would receive the wordless message.

He, too, smiled as a response.

Somehow, that silent exchange was enough for them; the message was understood. They didn't need words to show how much they appreciated each other.

27 - the light

He waited patiently at customer support, holding a cup of iced cocoa in one hand and a water bottle in the other. They both had an early shift today, and after an entire weekend apart, he wanted to do something kind for her.

Footsteps echoed from the entrance, and he straightened his back. When his gaze landed on her, his lips parted in surprise. He continued gaping at her until she stood in front of him, sporting her signature bright smile. "Morning, Sawyer."

"You cut your hair," he blurted out.

Ali chuckled at his directness and nodded, running her fingers through her now short hair. "I did. I got it cut yesterday."

He continued to stare at her in silence, and she turned away with a hint of embarrassment. She played with her hands as she spoke. "I actually thought you wouldn't notice."

"You've been making a lot of physical changes lately," Sawyer remarked suddenly; she gave him a curious look. "Like you've been wearing less makeup, except the thing you put on your eyelashes."

"It's called mascara. I look so dead without it, so it's a must, trust me," she said, then shifted awkwardly in her spot when he didn't respond. She felt like he was staring at her as if she was an entirely different person, when in reality, he thought she had never looked more herself. She had never looked more confident, and he found that beautiful.

"So," Ali cleared her throat, oblivious to the thoughts full of admiration running through his mind, and gestured towards the drinks. "What's that?"

He blinked, glancing down at his hands. "Oh. I got you iced cocoa."

"Thank you! I was craving this so bad yesterday; it's like you read my mind," she quipped, taking a gulp of the cold liquid. She sighed in satisfication, then returned her attention back to him as she began talking.

He listened to her speak for a minute, but his mind inadvertently drifted off as he gazed at her face. Before her, he never really saw the importance of one's face, and how much it could make someone's heart pound.

But now, whenever he looked at her, he felt like his heart would burst into confetti at any second—a feeling he inexplicably loved. And when he gathered enough courage to touch her, to kiss her, he felt so unusually warm inside. He felt so full of life, so full of hope.

She was the reason for it, he realized. She had restored the light in him after he lost himself in the dark, seeing no purpose in finding his way out. He desperately wanted to stay in the light now, with her by his side.

"Alice," he interrupted, swallowing back the growing lump in his throat. "This is last minute, and I know you have to check on your grandmother after work, but would you be able to make a quick stop at the pier with me?"

She scrunched her eyebrows. "Like today?"

"Yeah," Sawyer replied, giving no further explanation, and she narrowed her eyes at him curiously. She pursed her lips in thought, then shrugged.

"Sure. I don't think my grandma would mind if I was late by an hour or two."

"Okay," he breathed out, relieved, before tossing her a small, mysterious smile. "I can't wait."

§

As they walked down the familiar wooden planks, she noticed the way his mind seemed to be elsewhere. A small smile crept onto her face when she caught sight of his concentrated expression, squinting

his eyes and clenching his jaw.

When they reached the end of the pier, she confidently stepped up on the railing to reenact the *Titanic* scene, but quickly lost balance. She let out a yelp in alarm before his arms gripped her waist, holding her in place. She smiled sheepishly, tilting her head to look up at him as he lowered his head to look down at her. "Hi."

"Hi," he said back quietly. For a split second, she thought he was leaning in for a kiss, but he pulled away instead. He helped her step away from the railing, then turned away from her, throwing his head back as he stared up at the sky.

Ali watched as he sighed deeply, and she furrowed her eyebrows in concern. "Hey, what's wrong, Sawyer? Are you okay?"

A couple seconds passed; no response.

"Sawyer?" she called, reaching for his hand, then drew back in surprise when he abruptly faced her. His dark eyes were burning with a strange intensity that she couldn't decipher, but the way he was looking at her sent thrill-filled shivers down her spine.

"Alice," he whispered as he closed the distance between them and cupped her heated cheek with his cold hand. His voice was soft, yet slightly husky, and his eyes bored into hers more deeply than ever before. "Alice, you're so beautiful."

Her lips parted in shock at his unexpected words, rendered speechless. He, on the other hand, seemed to have the entire dictionary at his disposal as he continued on.

"I love your haircut, Alice. And I love the way your eyes crinkle when you laugh. And how your smiles are always so genuine and so bright. I love how you scrunch your nose when you're bored. I love how you hold my hand like it's not ice compared to yours. I love how you talk to me, how you talk to other people, how you're so open. I love your kindness, and the way you make me feel like I don't have to be someone I'm not. God, you're so accepting. You're just so *good,* Alice, and so beautiful to me," Sawyer spouted out, the words gushing out of him quickly and fluidly.

Ali softened underneath his gaze, feeling her body turn into mush with every word he uttered. "Sawyer..."

"I don't know how to do this, Alice. I just..." he trailed off, closing his eyes briefly, before he let out a shaky breath. When he opened his eyes again, he slowly tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear and stroked her cheek for a moment.

Then his eyes met hers again.

And he took a deep breath.

And asked: "Can I please be your boyfriend?"

A wide smile instantly bloomed across her face, her heart hammering, and she gently wrapped her arms around his neck. She lifted herself up to rest her forehead on his as she whispered back a response: "Only if I can be your girlfriend."

His face instantly brightened, and he grinned before snaking his hands around her waist and crashing his lips onto hers. She laughed into the kiss, then yelled in excitement when he suddenly twirled them around.

Her heart warmed upon seeing his eyes wide with joy, like an energized child. She held his face in her hands and left small kisses all over his cheeks, making him smile even brighter, his chest shaking with little laughs.

Once she was done, she sighed blissfully and laid her head on his shoulder, while his hands caressed her back. Her eyes floated up to the sky as a thought came to mind.

"Wait, how are we going to tell Brady and Marina?"

28 - alien emotion

a/n: taking attendance! say here if you're here! also please remember to vote because yes, i need the validation—

The four of them stared at each other as they stood in the back room.

Ali glanced at Sawyer, who had already been looking at her, then turned to Marina. Marina checked the time on her tablet, tapping her nails against the screen impatiently, and raised her eyebrows at Ali. Ali's eyes finally landed on Brady, who was staring at himself through his darkened phone screen, throwing up the middle finger and sticking his tongue out as a pose.

Ali let out a deep breath before clearing her throat. "Okay, so I'm sure you guys are wondering why you're here."

"If this is leading up to a whole monologue, let's remind ourselves that we only have ten minutes left of break," Marina interjected, and Ali nodded in understanding. Brady, on the other hand, tossed their supervisor a nasty look.

"Don't listen to her, city girl. Take your time," Brady said, and before Marina could object, he held up a hand and continued. "Because we're good friends and we listen to you."

Marina promptly closed her mouth, then briefly peered up at the ceiling as she counted to ten. Ali waited awkwardly until she finally lowered her head and nodded for her to proceed. Brady grinned smugly at her, and when Marina used her tablet as a barrier between them, his smile only widened.

"Alright, um, I guess I'll just say it?" she questioned, glancing at Sawyer for reassurance. His dark, lifeless eyes swirled with indistinct and foggy emotions when he looked at her, but the small smile that clashed with his signature stern face told her enough.

Slowly, but firmly, she took his hand in his and faced her coworkers.

"Sawyer and I are dating."

Ali waited for a reaction, any reaction, but was met with blank faces instead. She scrunched her eyebrows, confused, as Brady and Marina exchanged looks.

"Did you hear me? I said we're dating," Ali repeated, cocking her head toward their conjoined hands.

"Wow," Brady said flatly. "The two prettiest people here getting together? Who would've thought? Especially after they barely even flirted in public!"

Ali's cheeks reddened at that, while Sawyer merely watched as he unwrapped a bubble-gum flavored lollipop.

The stick stuck out of his mouth like a piece of straw, moving around as he spoke. "Did you guys *really* think we didn't know something was going on between you two? I mean, you literally look at each other like you're Edward and Bella. Right, Marina?"

Brady turned to the redhead, and his eyebrows furrowed upon seeing the strange expression on her face. Her gaze was fixated on the couple's interlaced fingers, until she slowly looked up into the sociopath's eyes.

He was looking at Ali, his eyes roaming her face, and Ali glanced over at him with a sweet smile.

Marina watched a smile of his own slowly form across his face, like a flower finally blooming after a harsh winter season. She then noticed his hand gently squeeze Ali's, his thumb rubbing circles on her skin.

When his gaze tore away from her, and his eyes fell onto his supervisor, there were still remnants of what hid behind his cold orbs—the feelings he so passionately felt for his girlfriend. And Marina, after four years of knowing the sociopath, understood the gravity of the situation. She recognized the alien emotion that was

suddenly swallowing him whole, and understood how much he desperately welcomed the feeling.

Happiness. Sawyer was happy, she realized. Happier than he'd been in years, happier than she'd ever seen him, happier than he thought was possible for someone like him.

Marina felt her heart swell, remembering the miserable and forlorn 16-year-old that she first met. He was nothing like the boy he once was now, and if Ali was the reason for it, then she wished nothing but the best for them.

"You guys are great for each other. I'm happy for you two," Marina finally said, breaking the silence, and Ali smiled brightly at her.

"Thank you, Marina."

"Yeah," Sawyer agreed quietly, his eyes still on the redhead. "Thank you, Marina."

She smiled, nodding. "Of course."

Brady, after a moment, coughed indiscreetly and said: "Thank you to you too, Brady."

Marina twisted her head to look at the lollipop addict and narrowed her eyes at him. "Thank you for what? Your attitude? No one is thankful for that, Brady. Get back to work, our break is over."

"What about them? Why don't you ever tell them to get back to work? I'm feeling very targeted," Brady complained as she dragged him away, ignoring his whining. He turned back to the couple and cupped his mouth as he shouted: "Hey, can't wait for our next back room meeting for when you tell us you're engaged! I volunteer to be the priest!"

Ali chuckled, shaking her head in amusement, and looked up at Sawyer once they were alone. He met her hazel eyes and slowly snaked his arms around her waist; she smiled and reached up to give him a peck on the nose.

Sawyer sighed softly as he rested his chin on her head, closing his

eyes. "Thank you to you too, Alice."

"You're welcome," she whispered, burying her face in his chest as they held each other closely. "And thank you, Sawyer."

29 - her blessing

He stood on the porch, holding a bouquet of flowers in his hands and staring ahead at the closed door.

Anxiety was a rare feeling for him, but he had come to realize why that was. Throughout his life, he never paid much attention to what people thought of him because he found it pointless. He was never ashamed of himself, because the concept of feeling guilty over something uncontrollable didn't make sense to him, although he did wish he was normal from time to time.

Things were different now. He had her—someone who truly accepted him for who he was. Despite knowing that, he still felt nervous around her because he cared about what she thought of him, and he saw the value in the things she valued.

Which was why meeting her grandmother—her favorite person—had his heart racing with fear.

He inhaled through his nose, pushing past the irksome feeling, and raised his fist to knock on the mahogany door. A faint smile crept onto his face as he listened to a pair of small footsteps sprint to the door. He could see her through the colorful stained glass panels, watching her wave excitedly from the other side.

"Hi!" Ali said happily once she opened the door. She reached up to press a quick kiss to his lips. "I missed you."

"I missed you too," Sawyer replied honestly, although it had only been two days since they last saw each other. Her radiant eyes dropped down to the flowers in his hands, and he cleared his throat. "They're for your grandmother."

She grinned. "You remembered that she likes peonies. That'll definitely give you some extra brownie points. Come on, she's waiting."

She pulled him inside and headed toward the living room on the left. He took off his shoes in the foyer as his eyes roamed the small house that was decorated with a mixture of bohemian and rustic designs. The ambience was immediately warm and welcoming; it reminded him of her.

After a brief moment, he stepped into the living room and locked eyes with the elderly woman in the beige armchair. She seemed smaller in person, compared to the pictures he had seen beforehand, but her kind eyes were the same. Her lips curled upwards, showing her prominent smile lines around her mouth and eyes, as she looked at his tall figure and defined features.

"Ali, you've caught yourself a pretty one, have you?" the old lady remarked, chuckling lightly, making her granddaughter blush. She noticed the bouquet in his hands and gasped quietly. "Are those peonies?"

Sawyer nodded, then walked over to her and gently laid the bouquet across her lap. He noticed the way her eyes lit up, just as her granddaughter's did.

The elderly woman took his hand and smiled up at him. "Thank you, dear. It's Sawyer, is it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Call me Nina. Anyone who gives me peonies is immediately on a first name basis," she said, giving his hand a pat before letting go. She leaned back against her chair and smelled the flowers as he plopped down beside Ali on the couch.

Ali interlaced their fingers, resting them on her knee, and turned to her grandmother. "Sawyer grew up here like you, Grandma. He's never even been to the city."

"You should take him there and show him around then," Nina suggested, sending a wink her way, and Ali smiled sheepishly.

Ali continued to easily lead the conversation for a couple more minutes, while Sawyer nodded along happily, before her

grandmother decided to interject. She handed her the bouquet as she spoke. "Ali, dear, would you put these in a vase for me before I forget? Make sure to use the tall, glass one with the clear design in the very back of the cabinet."

"Sure. I'll be right back."

Sawyer sunk back against the couch as her hand detached from his, and she walked to the kitchen. Nina craned her neck to see if she had left, then let out a long breath, turning to him. "My beloved granddaughter has many talents, but she simply doesn't seem to know when to stop talking sometimes."

"I don't mind that," he assured her, and she let out an amused chuckle.

"That's because you don't hear her talk about you all day. My, that girl sure likes you!" Nina exclaimed, huffing playfully, and he smiled as he pictured it in his mind. He imagined it was similar to the way she gushed about dachshunds one day, which was her favorite dog breed, with her hands flailing around enthusiastically.

"I like her a lot too," Sawyer said quietly as his eyes glazed over in thought. The old lady eyed him for a moment, particularly the fond smile that was openly sprawled across his face, before she straightened in her seat. His attention was drawn back to her when she leaned forward, her gaze suddenly intense.

"Then, Sawyer, I need you to make me a promise," Nina requested solemnly, and he nodded. "I need you to take care of Ali for me. She doesn't always know how to ask for help, but that doesn't mean she doesn't need it. Do you understand?"

He blinked like a clueless puppy. He had never taken care of someone else in his entire life, not even a pet, and he didn't have the faintest idea on how to do so. He was hardly sure if he could at all.

He searched the old lady's droopy, gentle eyes and wondered if she was aware of his disorder. A second later, as if she had eavesdropped on his thoughts, she gave him a reassuring smile.

"Yes, dear, Ali told me about your mental condition. Perhaps I'm old-fashioned, but I think as long as you care for my granddaughter as much as she cares for you, then nothing else matters."

His heart swelled with appreciation and respect for the elderly woman. He knew how much Ali treasured her grandmother's opinion, and he was relieved to know that they had her blessing. More than that, he felt honored.

"I promise I'll take care of Alice," Sawyer swore to her, fiery determination dancing in his dark irises, and she smiled brightly.

"I wish you two the very best then."

30 - his first

a/n: fun fact! whenever i write, i picture it all in my head like it's a movie, and i've been imagining this specific chapter for *so long* that i had a whole dream about it. this will be a longer chapter; i hope you like it as much as i do—

Her short hair floated freely in the air as she drove down the empty road. With the roof of her car down, the early summer wind greeted them happily, along with the beaming sun that warmed their skin. Her most upbeat playlist played through the speakers; her fingers drummed against the steering wheel absently.

He twisted his head to look at her from the passenger seat with his arm resting along the open window. He studied the eager look on her face, and she briefly glanced his way without saying a word.

Finally, after another minute of silence, he sighed impatiently. "Can you tell me where we're going now?"

"No, Sawyer, I already told you that it's a surprise," she laughed, clearly enjoying the frustrated pout that adorned his chiseled face.

"*Alice*," he drawled out, whining, and she grinned.

"*Sawyer*," she mimicked; he gave her a flat look. Caving in, she lowered the music volume and cleared her throat. "Okay, fine. Try to guess, and I'll tell you if you're right or not."

He narrowed his eyes at her pensively. They were both wearing their swimsuits underneath their clothing—a requirement that she emphasized a million times beforehand. He peeked at the backseats, where there was a blue cooler and a large transparent bag that was full of miscellaneous items.

He faced her again, cocking his head curiously. "Are we going to the beach?"

"Nope."

"The pool?"

"No."

"But some body of water, right?" Sawyer asked, and her lips curled mischievously.

"Yes. And it's some place hidden," Ali replied, and before he could question her further, she raised the music volume again. "That's all I'm saying!"

He pursed his lips and slumped in defeat. He watched her passionately sing along with the music throughout the rest of the car ride, and her face broke into a grin when she saw his feet tapping against the floor mat rhythmically.

An hour later, they arrived at their destination. He curiously looked around as she parked the car on the gravel, in front of a broad patch of bushes and trees. She leapt out of her seat excitedly and hastily plunged her hand into the clear bag in the back of the car.

Ali pulled out a bottle of sunscreen and glanced up at him as she meticulously rubbed it over her skin. "Did you put on sunscreen yet?"

"No," Sawyer admitted, then swiftly caught the bottle in his hands when she threw it his way. She waited patiently for him to finish smearing it all over his body, her eyes fixated on a specific cluster of foliage across from her.

He stored the sunscreen back into her bag and stepped towards her. "So now will you tell me what we're doing?"

"I'll show you! Follow me," Ali said, gushing with excitement, as she grasped his hand and pulled him through the greenery. He followed her warily, pushing away the plants that neared his face, and wondered how she was familiar enough with this path to walk through it so confidently.

Then, all of a sudden, light burst through the leaves as they stepped

out of the dark foliage and onto rocky terrain. They came to a stop, and his eyes widened in amazement at the sight before them.

It was a concealed waterfall with vast vegetation surrounding it, the sun shining down into the glistening, navy blue water. He stepped toward the edge of the cliff and craned his neck to get a glimpse of the water that cascaded down the rock. He turned to her with a marveled look on his face. "Alice, what is this place?"

"I found it after many hours of digging through Google, and I talked to someone who came to this place pretty often. They showed me around and told me all about it, so that I could bring you here myself," she explained, wearing a bright smile, and he quirked an eyebrow at her.

"Wait," Sawyer paused, glancing down at their clothes. "Why are we wearing swimsuits?"

"Because we're going to jump," she grinned, watching his expression widen with shock. She caught a flicker of thrill in his eyes, but it quickly faded as he frowned.

"Isn't that dangerous?" he inquired, although it was more for her sake rather than his. He was willing to jump whether it was safe or not, but despite his impulsive urges, he found himself hesitating on her behalf.

Ali smiled softly, recognizing how foreign the question was to him, and squeezed his hand with silent appreciation. "No, I checked with a couple of people who've been here before, and they said it's not risky at all. Waterfall jumping is safer because the churning water softens the landing."

Sawyer searched her eyes for any trace of fear or unease. "Are you really sure you want to do this? You don't have to because of me."

"I'm positive," she reassured him, nodding, and gazed at him for a moment. Then, she finally sucked in a breath and pulled away from him. "Alright, what are you waiting for?"

He flashed her a small smile before he began to remove his T-shirt.

She took a few steps away from him as she pulled off her cover-up, revealing her white two-piece set. She turned her back to him, feeling self-conscious, and awkwardly adjusted her straps on her shoulders.

He tossed his shirt to the side and pulled his black swim trunks up to his hips. He then faced her, and he furrowed his eyebrows when he realized she was so far from him. "Hey, you ready?"

Ali chewed the inside of her cheek nervously and nodded before she stepped over to him, hugging her body tightly. She avoided his eyes, causing him to cock his head in concern. "Alice? Are you...okay?"

"Um," she murmured, looking down at her bare feet. She decided it was best to tell him the truth, since it wouldn't be fair if he was the only one who had to be honest. "I'm just a little...insecure, you know?"

"No, I don't. Why are you insecure?" Sawyer questioned, watching her intently, and she lifted her head to look up at him. She opened her mouth to respond, but closed it again when she realized she didn't really have an answer. His dark eyes swept over her body before he spoke. "You don't have anything to be insecure about. You're beautiful, Alice."

She softened under his heartfelt gaze, and a smile quickly crawled onto her face. "Thank you. You're beautiful too, Sawyer."

He scrunched his nose slightly, finding the adjective so foreign in regard to him, while his heart fluttered with delight. He then stretched out his hand towards her, which she happily took, and they marched over to the cliff.

They exchanged excited looks, then sprung forward hand in hand. Her hair flew above her ears as she screamed, while he grinned with thrill. He had always wanted to jump like this, and his heart pounded with adrenaline now that he finally was.

For the short moment they were in the air, they felt like one with the shimmering waterfall. They plummeted into the deep water

below, bereft of rocks, just as each individual drop of water did before it merged with the rest of the river. When they surfaced from the jump, their hair was perfectly slicked back as they panted heavily.

"Oh, my God! That was insane," she breathed, rubbing her eyes, and he nodded vigorously. She swam closer to him, watching the droplets fall from his hair and down his forehead. "How do you feel?"

"Amazing," he answered honestly, smiling widely, and she chuckled.

"I'm glad," Ali murmured before pressing a small kiss to his wet lips. He snaked his hand around her bare waist underwater, making her tense, but the happy twinkle in his eyes made all of her insecurities fade into oblivion. She wrapped her arms around his neck, their bodies pressed against each other, and rested her head on his shoulder.

For a moment, neither of them spoke as their minds wandered off peacefully. He leaned his cheek against her head, swaying them slightly in the water. A thought came to mind as he held her in his arms, and he swallowed the lump in his throat before he spoke. "You're my first girlfriend."

She smiled into his shoulder, feeling his heart hammer wildly in his chest. She closed her eyes and whispered quietly through the crashing of the waterfall: "And maybe I'll be your last."

He slowly registered her words, feeling his soul become flooded with warmth like never before. He, too, smiled and kissed the top of her head, tightening his hold on her. "I'd like that."

31 - his everything

It had been almost a month since they started dating, and much to everyone's surprise, their relationship was as healthy as it was adorable.

Now that they were public, they no longer had to hide their kisses; although they still snuck into the back room from time to time for privacy. She was usually the first to initiate any action, but he was gradually becoming comfortable enough to do it himself.

He wasn't sure how relationships worked, and he greatly appreciated her endless patience. Neither of them wanted to force or rush anything, in fear of it becoming too much for both of them. After all, this was just as new to her—considering she had never dated a sociopath before.

But the important thing was: they were both *happy*.

Marina bought a small refreshment from the in-store restaurant and settled down on a bench beside the bathrooms. She placed her tablet in her lap as she drank the juice, her keen eyes floating across the store like a hawk.

Her gaze landed on customer service, where the store's strangest yet cutest couple resided. She watched as the two of them efficiently handled three customers back to back, and they did it all together.

Nowadays, they never ceased to surprise her. She couldn't fathom how Ali had managed to unveil all of these different sides of him, and how content they seemed with each other. Was it really as genuine as it seemed?

She glanced over at Ali, who was undeniably one of the kindest people she knew. The way she looked at Sawyer told her, and everyone nearby, just how much she liked him. She wore her heart on her sleeve and her feelings all over her face without a single

drop of insincerity.

But Sawyer, the only sociopath she hoped she would ever know, was a different story. It was true that he smiled more around Ali, but how could anyone be so sure that it was unfeigned? How could anyone be so sure about *anything* with him?

Marina pursed her lips as she looked over at Ali again, eyeing her carefree expression. She suddenly stood from the bench, leaving her tablet behind, and marched over to them.

"Hey, Marina, what's up?" Ali greeted cheerfully, then scrunched her eyebrows upon noticing the firm look on her face.

"Hi, Ali," Marina responded quickly before she turned to the dark-haired boy beside her. "Sawyer, follow me. We need to talk."

Sawyer slowly averted his eyes from Ali and peered down at their supervisor. He didn't reply for a moment as he robotically searched her face, while she steadily maintained her determination.

He finally nodded and leaned down to peck Ali on the lips, then followed Marina out into the parking lot. The summer sun shone down on them as they stared at each other with the same amount of intensity.

"Listen, Sawyer," she began, her voice sharp. "After almost five years working together, I think you owe me a moment of truth. No BS. No manipulation. Just tell it to me straight, got it?"

He tilted his head, intrigued. She had never been so stern with him; she usually saved that for Brady.

"Okay," he replied plainly, having not a single clue as to where this conversation was going. Marina paused to choose her words carefully, chewing on her lower lip, while he studied her curiously.

"Just—do you actually have feelings for Ali? Is she really just as important to you as you are to her? Or have you been manipulating her this entire time? Please, Sawyer, be honest with me just this once. I don't want to see her get hurt," Marina blurted out rapidly, her eyes wide with distress, before looking up at him again.

His expression remained unchanged for a few seconds as he merely stared at her with his dark, stormy orbs. She almost thought he wouldn't answer her at all, until she saw something abruptly snap in him.

He clenched his jaw before he spoke, his voice sounding like it belonged to someone else entirely. "I have never manipulated Alice, and I'm never going to. Do you know why, Marina?"

She slowly shook her head, frozen underneath his unwavering gaze.

"Because I want it to be real, I want *us* to be real. I *need* this one thing in my life to be completely genuine, and not something I lied my way into, because I–I..." Sawyer paused, the words getting lost in his throat, but she understood what he didn't yet have the courage to say. "Alice is the first person I haven't had to manipulate into liking me. She's the first person who knows me, the real me, and hasn't treated me differently because of it."

Marina's lips parted in amazement as he continued on, wearing the most *human* expression she had ever seen on him.

"She's teaching me so many things, and making me feel so many things, that I thought weren't possible for someone like me. Of course I have feelings for her, how could I not? She's the best person I've ever met. I don't need to manipulate someone who's everything I could possibly need and want, all on her own," he said, not a speck of doubt laced in his voice, as an unrestrained smile found its way onto his face.

Marina softened, feeling tears pool in her eyes upon watching the emotionless boy she knew pour his heart out. She almost felt an indescribable maternal type of happiness for him. "Sawyer, I..."

He craned his neck to peek inside the department store; his smile widened instinctively when he saw his girlfriend's face. "She's everything to me, Marina. I promise you. I couldn't lie about how I feel about her even if I tried."

"For the first time, I completely believe you," Marina assured him as

she swiftly wiped her eyes, flashing him a warm smile. "And I'm happy for you, Sawyer. I really am. I'm sorry I didn't believe you beforehand."

"I wouldn't believe me either."

She chuckled, nodding. "Yeah. Well, that's all I had to say. You can, um, get back to work now."

Marina watched from the parking lot as he walked back into the store, heading straight for his girlfriend. He wrapped his arms around her tightly, catching her by surprise, and planted kisses all over the top of her head. Ali reddened and laughed, reaching up to kiss his cheek.

Marina could now smile freely when she looked at them, knowing that the *both* of them truly were in love with each other.

32 - equal footing

a/n: wait, the author's not dead? the story's not finished yet? can i get an amen?

hi, sawyer simps! so sorry for taking a sudden and prolonged break from writing in general; i just wasn't feeling it anymore. i'm hoping to complete this story in the upcoming month, but we'll see. i'm thinking of ending it with a nice, even 50 chapters (or somewhere around that)!

thank you for sticking with me, and thank you to those who were worried about me while i was away. you guys are so nice. i hope you're all doing okay, and that you enjoy this chapter—

It was their three month anniversary, and they were the living embodiment of bliss.

After picking up the food she ordered, he drove them to a vast field where they would watch the sun set together. She watched in amusement as he popped open the trunk of his hatchback car and hastily prepared it for them.

He stretched out his hand to help her climb inside once he was done, and she took it with a smile. They began eating their food in silence, listening to the hums of nature around them. When the sun started to gradually sink, their eyes were captivated by the warm colors that were painted across the sky.

Ali pushed away the empty wrappers and snuggled closer to him, stuffing her head in the spot between his neck and his shoulder—her favorite spot. Sawyer leaned his head on hers and rested his arm along her back, feeling just as comfortable.

After a moment of peaceful sky-gazing, she reached for his other hand and played with his fingers. "I feel like we're in a music video."

"That's what I forgot," Sawyer sighed in frustration with himself as he started to detach himself from her. "Hold on, let me turn on the radio—"

"No, no, no. I never thought I would say this, but I don't want music right now," Ali reassured him, quickly pulling him back to his previous position. He looked down at her with an awestruck expression, and she chuckled. "I know it sounds crazy, but take it as a compliment. I like the sound of your voice more than anyone else's on the radio."

Sawyer averted his gaze from her, returning to the colorful sky, while a smile that could only be triggered by her formed across his face. She, too, stared at the sky for a few moments as her mind thought back to when she first moved to town. Her life had changed so much since then, merely by meeting this cryptic yet lovable boy.

"Hey," Ali said as she pulled away from him to look him in the eyes. "Did you know I originally promised myself I wouldn't get into any relationships while I was in town?"

He shook his head, and she smiled. Ali leaned forward and pecked his lips once, then twice, then one more time. When she was about to lean back, he planted one last kiss on her nose, an action which still managed to make her cheeks flush every time.

"I'm glad you didn't listen to yourself," Sawyer remarked, while her eyes dipped down to their joined hands.

"Yeah," she chuckled quietly. "Me too. For a lot of reasons."

"Hm?" he murmured curiously, and she shrugged, giving him a lopsided smile.

"I don't know. I really only moved to this place to take care of my grandma, and I thought it would be an easy transition for myself. But it wasn't. It was kind of lonely at times."

He nodded in understanding; loneliness wasn't a foreign concept to him anymore, now that he knew what it was like to feel the opposite.

"But you," Ali said in a singsong voice, raising her hand to point at him. "You, Sawyer Price, helped me with that. I genuinely think I would've been a bit lost without you. So... thank you."

Sawyer blinked, taken aback by her words. All this time, he thought he didn't do enough, that he didn't give her as much as she gave him. He never realized that they were on an equal footing, but it was such a relief to know that now.

"Thank you too, Alice. Thank you," Sawyer whispered softly before wrapping his arms around her. She grinned and squeezed him tightly, rocking them from side to side. He laughed when the car began to shake as well, then gave her a heartwarming kiss that made chills run down her spine.

They were too distracted with each other to see the sun finally disappear, but perhaps the moon was more appropriate anyway.

33 - the tension

a/n: slightly explicit content warning. nothing too graphic, nothing too steamy, but it's something. sorry for the late update again!

Sawyer sat rigidly on his couch, staring blankly at the wall, as he repeatedly peeked at the time on his phone. He knew she was usually punctual, but he could barely wait any longer.

Just as his patience was wearing thin, three little knocks filled his ears, and he sprung from his seat. He opened the door, then let out a surprised grunt when she slammed into his chest. She wrapped her arms around him tightly and closed her eyes. He heard her say something, but her voice was muffled as she flattened her face against his chest.

"Hi, Alice," he said, an amused smile tugging on the corner of his mouth, as he returned the hug. She reluctantly peeled away from him a moment later and stepped inside his small apartment. Her eyes settled on the popcorn bowl, along with her favorite drink, on the coffee table in his living room. Two blankets were neatly folded on the couch, ready to be used, and the TV was already on the correct channel.

She turned to him while he closed the door. "You always put so much effort in our movie nights, Sawyer. Even though you don't really like movies all that much."

"Only with you."

"Aw, you're so romantic. We should date or something," Ali suggested, and he smiled. He pretended to mull it over for a moment, then sighed in defeat.

"Fine, I guess," Sawyer muttered, feigning distaste. She plopped down on the couch and playfully narrowed her eyes at him. He sat

beside her, covering their legs with the blankets, while she cradled the popcorn bowl in her lap.

As the movie started, he threw his arm over her shoulder and inched closer to her. Ali quirked an eyebrow at him. "You're being a little too forward for our first date, sir."

"Is this too forward?" he asked, then swiftly lowered his head to meet her lips. She smiled into the kiss, almost dropping the bowl of popcorn, and reached up to stroke his cheek. They only broke apart when a thunderclap suddenly sounded from the TV, startling them out of their heated trance. Ali chuckled and offered him some popcorn, which he gladly took.

Throughout the rest of the movie, they sporadically stole curious glances at one another, wondering if they felt the tension too. She was laying on top of him on the couch with her ear to his heart by the time the credits rolled. One of his hands played with her hair while the other laid on the curve of her waist.

Ali turned her head to lock eyes with him, bringing her hands up to his chest and resting her chin atop of her fingers. "So, did you like the movie?"

"Yeah," Sawyer replied quietly, although he seemed uncertain. He stared at her, keenly aware of their position, and gave her a small sheepish smile. "But I couldn't really pay attention."

An awkward silence passed over them as she felt his heartbeat through his shirt. Their eyes never left each other's, although neither of them knew what to say for a moment. He continued to curl her hair around his finger absently, and she pursed her lips in thought.

"Me neither," she finally said. They both hesitated on their next move, feeling something shift between them. It had almost been half a year since they started dating, and they somehow still felt that giddy nervousness around each other.

Ali sucked in a breath, hoping it would calm her heart, before slowly lifting herself up to kiss him again. Their lips moved in

unison, slowly and tenderly. He subconsciously tightened his hold on her waist, while her hands explored his chest. She pulled back momentarily to leave a trail of kisses down his neck, and he swallowed harshly.

Before she could return to his lips, he raised them up into a sitting position and leaned against the couch. He gently held her neck as he kissed her with more fiery fervor than before, making her smile in surprise. His hand accidentally slipped underneath her shirt, and his heart pounded with embarrassment.

"It's okay, Sawyer," Ali whispered in between kisses as she stopped his hands from pulling away. He opened his eyes for a second, unsure, before slowly gliding his fingers across her bare skin. His touch sent shivers down her spine, despite how cautious and timid he was being.

She fiddled with the hem of his shirt as a wordless question, and his mind raced with apprehension. He tore away from her and cast his eyes down, in a way that briefly made it feel like this really was their first date. His voice was small and hesitant; she barely recognized it. "Do you...want to go to my room?"

Ali smiled and gave him a quick peck on his cheek. "Only if you want to."

Sawyer nodded slowly, glancing up at her. He watched as she climbed off of him and stretched her hand towards him. They walked into his bedroom, hand in hand, and stopped at the foot of his bed. She pulled off her shirt and settled down on the edge of the mattress, waiting patiently for him.

He flushed slightly at the sight of her undergarments, then quickly averted his gaze as he took off his own shirt. She slid off her pants a short moment later, and he hesitated on doing the same.

"I've never done this before," Sawyer said suddenly, and she cocked her head playfully.

"You've never taken your clothes off before?" she asked; he gave her a flat look, albeit he appreciated her ability to make the

atmosphere less heavy. Ali gestured him toward her, and he reluctantly stepped forward. She laced their fingers together as she spoke. "Do you want to wait?"

"No!" he blurted out too quickly, and she grinned. "I mean, no."

"Okay, then. If it makes you feel better, I'm nervous too," she assured him; he pursed his lips pensively.

"Well, do *you* want to wait?"

Ali laughed, startling him. "Hell, no."

Sawyer smiled, then leaned down to press a kiss to her lips. His heart hammered with a mixture of fear and thrill, two emotions that he had never experienced so intensely until he met her. He would never get used to it; he was certain that these sentiments would always feel alien to him, but for some reason, he liked that. He liked knowing that she was the only person who could make him feel this way, and unbeknownst to him, so did she.

He tensed slightly when her hands began to fumble with his zipper, before he relaxed under her warm touch. Soon enough they were skin to skin on his bed as he hovered over her, his tongue exploring her body. Her soft moans overwhelmed him with lust—another unfamiliar yet intoxicating feeling.

As the night went on, he discovered a plethora of other sensations with the person he cherished the most. He knew, right there and then, that although he was incapable of making long-term commitments, he wanted nothing more but to spend the rest of his life with her.

34 - a revelation

"Hey, Sawyer!" a familiar voice called as he headed to the back room.

The sociopath twisted his head to glance over his shoulder, then purposefully quickened his pace. He safely locked himself inside of the storage room, letting out a small sigh of relief, before searching for the boxes he needed.

"Sawyer, didn't you hear me calling you?" Brady asked, suddenly materializing in front of him, and he flinched out of surprise. Sawyer looked at the door, then back at the sugar addict; he frowned when he noticed the extra set of keys in his hands.

"I did. I was ignoring you."

Brady smiled, not the least bit fazed by his intentionally callous candor. Since he started dating Ali, and their relationship had proven to be genuine, his coworkers had been growing less fearful of him. Sawyer still hadn't decided whether he liked this new development or not. "That's okay. I'm used to it."

"What do you want?" he asked tiredly as he continued to look around the storage room.

"Oh, nothing. I was just wondering how things are going with you and the city girl," Brady said, fishing a mystery lollipop out of his pocket.

Sawyer paused and shot him a dubious look. "Why are you asking me instead of Alice, like you usually do?"

"Because I want to know *your* perspective," he replied simply, rolling the diabetes stick around in his mouth, and Sawyer stared at him for a moment. He wasn't sure if Marina had put him up to this, as a safety measure to definitively verify his true intentions with their precious city girl, but he doubted she would've trusted him

with such an important task.

"And why should I tell you? You never supported our relationship."

"True, but it was with good reason, you have to admit that. I mean, how was I supposed to know that Ali would be the *one* person you wouldn't manipulate? You never gave us a reason to trust you before," Brady reasoned, and although Sawyer was slightly taken aback by this sudden display of intellect from him, he knew he had a point.

He faintly remembered his first encounters with Brady and Marina; he was still in high school at the time, and he was much more merciless in his teenage years. He knew he had to lay low in school in order to avoid expulsion—not that he cared about his education, but because he simply wanted to graduate as fast as possible.

Outside of school, however, he was able to behave as he pleased, and his job at the department store was like target practice for him. When he didn't have any customers to manipulate, he turned to Brady and Marina instead, using all of their weaknesses to his advantage. They eventually saw through his act, thus creating his sociopathic reputation among his coworkers.

Brady studied the man before him and sighed, pulling the lollipop out of his mouth to speak. "Listen, I know that's still no reason to have spoken about you so badly. I should've been the bigger person and yada yada yada. I'm actually rooting for you and the city girl now, which is why I'm asking you how it's going. Sorry if I offended —"

"You didn't," Sawyer interjected, tossing him one of his famously impassive looks. "As long as you don't try to intervene with my relationship with Alice, I don't care."

"Of course you don't," Brady chuckled, shaking his head.

A moment of silence swept over them as they looked away from each other. Sawyer hesitated, knowing he would get nothing out of

telling him anything, before he surprisingly caved. "We're doing good, better than I ever hoped. What we have is strange, we shouldn't work as well as we do, but I've never felt so...happy. Every day is a new surprise with her."

"I don't know what's crazier: the fact that a sociopath is in love, or that someone is knowingly in love with a sociopath," Brady remarked, then furrowed his eyebrows when Sawyer visibly tensed. He opened his mouth to apologize in case he had overstepped, while Sawyer met his eyes with an enigmatic expression on his face.

"*Love*?" he repeated slowly, as if this was his first time hearing it.

Brady looked around awkwardly and nodded. "Uh, yeah. You guys have been dating for a while, haven't you? Don't you, like, love her or something? I'm just guessing here because I've only ever been committed to candy."

Sawyer's eyes glazed over as he became absorbed in his thoughts. The word kept echoing in his mind insistently, like an earthquake rattling his brain, and he wondered if it could be true. A sociopath in love. It was possible, of course, but it was a difficult feat.

But when he thought about her and all the things he made her feel, he knew the cause had to be love. She was no sorceress; she was simply Alice, and he loved her. He loved everything about her. He was sure of it.

"So do you need some help carrying all of those boxes?" Brady asked, drawing him out of his thoughts.

Sawyer blinked, still slightly dazed. He briefly glanced over at the boxes and nodded. "Yeah, there's four."

"Great, you and Marina can each carry two. I'll go get her for you," Brady said nonchalantly as he skipped out of the storage room with his lollipop. Sawyer didn't bother stopping him, using the time alone to think about this emotional revelation.

A smile crept onto his face; he couldn't wait to tell her how he felt.

35 - the promise

a/n: hi again. this story is not completed, i just suck at updating.

He stood at his station and aimlessly scrolled through his phone, looking around every few minutes. He was growing more and more impatient by the second.

The last time he'd seen her was on Friday at work, and she hadn't responded to any of his texts during the weekend. He assumed she was simply busy and he didn't want to be a nuisance, although he missed her terribly now.

He checked the time on his phone and furrowed his eyebrows. She was late, and Ali was never late. After waiting for a couple more minutes, he left his station and searched for his supervisor.

"Marina," he called out once he spotted her in the dairy aisle.

She turned, startled. "Good morning, Sawyer."

"Have you seen Alice?"

"No, she called in sick and said she probably won't be able to work at all this week. I assumed you knew," Marina informed him as she examined the expiration dates on the milk cartons.

"Sick? Did she say what with?"

She shook her head. "No, but she sounded awful. Like her nose was stuffy. I told her not to worry though; you and the other customer service employees can cover for her."

"Not me. I'm sick too," Sawyer suddenly said, and she turned her head to look at him.

She raised an eyebrow at him, unconvinced. "You look fine to me."

"I'm—," he faked a cough, "—not fine. So I'll be going now."

"Sawyer, I'm not falling for that. We don't have enough employees to cover both of your shifts all week," Marina said as she threw an expired milk carton into the cardboard box beside her.

"Hope you figure it out," he replied nonchalantly, walking away, and she sighed.

"Fine, I'll take care of your shift for today! But only for today!" she yelled after him.

"All week!" he shouted as he continued to walk away; she glared at his back.

"You owe me, Sawyer!" Marina growled before returning to her work, grumbling in frustration to herself. "I don't get paid enough for this."

§

For the first time in his life, he made chicken noodle soup. He had heard that that's what people normally ate when they're sick, so he tried his best to follow an online recipe for it. He had also stopped by the supermarket for a small bouquet, and now he stood before the familiar mahogany door.

He straightened his back, then knocked against the door. A minute of absolute silence passed. He quickly peered inside through the stained glass window before he knocked again, more firmly this time. Finally, he heard faint footsteps.

Sawyer waited patiently, and when the footsteps grew closer, he drew in an excited breath. The footsteps ceased when she reached the door, but for some reason, she didn't immediately open it.

Sawyer blinked, slightly confused. "Alice, it's me. Marina told me you're sick, so I made you some soup."

After a few seconds, she slowly opened the door enough to peek through it. He showed her the container, which she briefly glanced down at. He could barely see her entire face, and he cocked his

head curiously.

"Why are you hiding, Alice? Are you embarrassed of something?" he asked her, and she didn't respond for a moment.

"No. Thank you for the soup, I really appreciate it. You should get back to work," Ali said quietly as she quickly took the container from his hands before he could get a good look at her. He noticed something different about her voice—the emptiness of it.

"It's alright, I took the week off. I can stay with you," he reassured her, stepping closer.

"That's not really necessary—"

"Look, I bought you flowers too. They're your grandmother's favorite. Is she awake? I want to show them to her," Sawyer cut her off as he held up the bouquet of colorful peonies. He was craning his neck, attempting to look behind her in search of Nina, when he heard her take a shaky breath.

Sawyer slowly pushed the door open the rest of the way, and his heart skipped a beat when he finally laid eyes on her. Fresh tears were streaming down her flushed face as she stared at the flowers in his hands.

"Alice, what's wrong? What happened? Why are you crying?" Sawyer asked hastily, ridden with worry, and she pursed her lips that were now wet with tears.

"My grandmother..." Ali said, trembling. "She's gone."

Sawyer fell silent, clueless as to what to do. He couldn't bear seeing the pain on her face; it was probably worse than feeling pain himself. He opened his mouth a couple times, trying to find the right words to console her, but to no avail.

All of a sudden, she seemed to lose her last shred of strength as her knees buckled. He instantly wrapped his arms around her for support, and she leaned against him rigidly. She roughly cleared her throat before she spoke. "I'm sorry. I don't want to burden you. I'll be okay and back to normal soon, so don't worry about me. Thank

you for coming."

She tried to pull away from him, but he wouldn't budge. Instead, his grip only tightened. "Sawyer, really. It's okay. I'm going to be okay. You don't have to stay."

He didn't respond. Keeping one hand around her waist, his other hand reached behind him to close the front door. He placed the bouquet on the small table beside them, then steadily held her with both of his hands again. Their eyes locked, and he regarded her with a tender look as he gently wiped away her tears.

"I'm not leaving you, Alice," Sawyer whispered as he held her face in his hands, staring into her glistening eyes. "I'll stay for as long as you'll let me."

Ali's mouth parted open as she was overwhelmed with emotion. She wanted to hold back, she wanted to pretend she was fine, but in his arms, she suddenly felt an alleviating sense of safety. Before she could control herself, a strangled sob escaped from her lips. Her eyes fell shut as she buried her face in his chest, gripping his shirt.

Sawyer leaned his back against the door and held her tightly. They slowly slid to the floor, and she clung onto him desperately. He closed his eyes as he wordlessly rubbed her back and rested his head against hers, pressing a kiss to her forehead every now and then. She cried to the point of exhaustion, comforted by his warm embrace the entire time.

As he held her, he heard Nina's words from when they first met echo in his mind.

"Then, Sawyer, I need you to make me a promise. I need you to take care of Ali for me. She doesn't always know how to ask for help, but that doesn't mean she doesn't need it. Do you understand?"

Sawyer inhaled deeply and brought her even closer to him. "I promise, Alice. I'm going to take care of you."

36 - the flashbacks

For the next few days, Sawyer stayed at her house. He cooked for her, drew her baths, and held her close every night. He had wiped away countless tears by now and provided her with silent comfort whenever she needed it.

He only left her to drop by his apartment for a change of clothes, but he always returned as quickly as traffic would let him.

It was the day of her grandmother's funeral. She had planned and organized everything herself, refusing the help of her father. She claimed that she didn't want to trouble him, knowing how busy he always was with work, but he had a sneaking suspicion that she simply needed something to focus on.

Sawyer stood by her for every step of the way, from the moment she began organizing the funeral, to the moment she was standing in front of her grandmother's open casket in the cemetery chapel. She stared at her grandmother's pale face, still half-expecting she would open her eyes and miraculously wake up from her deep sleep.

Ali blinked back, returning to reality, when a hand gently squeezed her shoulder. She looked up at him and met his dark eyes, which now seemed full of life in comparison to what lifelessness truly was. He handed her the bouquet of the brightest peonies she had ever seen, then stepped back to give her space.

She slowly placed the bouquet inside of the casket, positioning it in between her grandmother's cold hands. She closed her eyes for a moment as she bowed her head, crying silently. After a few minutes, she inhaled shakily and wiped her tears with her sleeve. A familiar hand circled around her waist as she was led back to her seat.

Sawyer held her hand throughout the ceremony, unperturbed when she subconsciously tightened her grip every now and then. He had

flashbacks of attending his mother's funeral when he was only ten years old, and he remembered how difficult it was for him to understand the concepts of death and grief. Especially when he hadn't finished learning the concept of maternal love yet.

He turned to her briefly, eyeing the heartbroken look on her face. For once, he was deeply familiar with the emotions she was experiencing, and he intended to give her what he had lacked—support.

Once the ceremony ended and the chapel emptied, he remained seated with her in front of the casket. Her eyes were glazed over in thought, replaying the many memories she had shared with her grandmother.

"Ali," a deep voice called, and she straightened. The man stepped in front of the couple, locking eyes with her.

"Dad," she whispered as she stood from her seat and wrapped her arms around him. "I'm so sorry, Dad."

"You have nothing to be sorry about. I'm glad you were there for her until her very last breath," he said softly, hugging her tightly. "She always said her biggest fear was dying alone. Thank you for not letting that happen."

He pulled away from her with a sad smile, and she mirrored his expression. His eyes then drifted over to the sociopath, who was watching them carefully.

"You must be Sawyer. I'm glad we could finally meet," her father said as he stretched out his hand. "I'm Andre, Ali's dad."

Sawyer stood from his seat and shook his hand. "Nice to meet you."

"How about we have dinner? I want to catch up with my daughter and get to know you. Is that alright with you two?" Andre asked them, and after exchanging glances, they nodded in agreement. "Good. I'd like to drop by my mom's house afterward. There are a few things I want to take back home with me, some memorabilia."

"Okay. I'm just going to use the restroom real quick before we go,"

Ali said before leaving the two men alone. They waited at the entrance of the chapel for her in an awkward silence.

Andre glanced over at him and cleared his throat. "I appreciate you being there for my daughter. She's mentioned you a few times on the phone, so I know how much you mean to her."

"She means a lot to me too."

"Good," her father sighed as he looked around aimlessly. "If not for you, I wouldn't have supported her decision to stay here instead of going back with me to the city, and going back to her college there."

Sawyer shifted, slightly taken aback by the news. "She didn't tell me."

"Really? I thought you might've had a hand in the idea."

"No. I've told her before that I would move to the city if she ever wanted to go back. My father owns a few stores there too," Sawyer told him.

Andre shrugged. "She must like it here then. I don't think the city ever felt like a home again after her mother left, whereas this town always did because of her grandmother. But I suppose you've become part of the reason as well now."

Sawyer stared down at the floor as he considered her father's words. He came to the conclusion that he, too, hadn't felt at home since his mother passed.

Being with Ali, however, had begun to stir that latent feeling once more.

37 - home decor

The next two weeks were a blur to both of them.

Ali continued to cope with her grandmother's death by distracting herself with productive tasks, such as settling her grandmother's financial and legal affairs. She even returned to work, although she decided to take on fewer shifts for the time being. Sawyer was the one who picked up her other shifts as a way to keep them safe until she was ready to fully come back.

However, he didn't mind the extra work, especially when he had the privilege of coming home to her most nights. Ever since the funeral, it had become too emotionally draining for her to spend every day at her grandmother's house, and as a result, she began staying at his apartment every now and then.

It was strange at first. He wasn't accustomed to waking up with someone in his bed every morning, or the double amount of groceries he had to buy. It had been a couple of years since he moved out of his father's house, so sharing a space with someone had already become foreign to him. Sooner than later though, he found himself enjoying her constant presence and missing her even more when she went back to her house.

Sawyer slowly opened his eyes as the morning sunlight shined through the curtains of his bedroom. He smiled upon seeing her laying beside him, loosely holding on to his arm that was draped across her waist. He lifted his head to glance at the clock on the table beside her, then shifted closer. He leaned his head against her shoulder and pulled her closer from behind, sighing peacefully. He began to press small kisses across her shoulder, then down her back, before he rested his head against the pillow again.

"Don't stop," Ali suddenly interjected, and he sat up to look at her. After having spent so many mornings together, he knew exactly what her voice sounded like when she first wakes up.

"How long have you been awake?" he questioned accusingly as she turned her body towards him.

She smiled. "Almost two hours, I think. I made breakfast for the both of us, ate some, then came back into bed."

"Why?"

"Because I got to wake up next to you, so I wanted you to experience it too," she explained, then plastered on a sad frown. "Unless you don't like waking up next to me."

"I didn't say—"

"I knew it, you don't actually have feelings for me. It's all been a lie, my heart is shattered forever!" Ali cried dramatically as she pulled the covers over her head and pretended to sob. He dove underneath the covers and wrapped his arms around her, despite her trying to playfully push him away.

"The only thing I love more than waking up next to you is falling asleep with you in my arms, Alice," Sawyer whispered in her ear, sending shivers down her back, and she grinned.

"Wow, you're good," she replied before he turned her chin towards him and kissed her slowly under the covers. Once they finally pulled away from each other, she smiled shyly as she felt her heart pound due to one little kiss. She brought her hands up to snake around his neck and play with his hair on the back of his head as he hovered over her. "So me staying here sometimes hasn't been bothering you?"

Sawyer's eyes roamed across her face before he pecked her nose and watched her make a face. "No."

"You haven't grown any pet peeves about me yet?"

"You make a mess in the bathroom when you shower and get ready to go somewhere. But I don't mind that when we shower together," he remarked casually, while she blushed and sheepishly looked away for a moment. He smiled knowingly and dipped down to plant a trail of kisses down her neck. "Do you like my apartment, Alice?"

Ali met his eyes again to answer. "Yeah, it's nice. It's more spacious than it seems at first. It could use some better interior design though, if you're asking for my advice."

"If it had better decorations, would you live here?"

"Oh, yeah, definitely. All I'd have to do is take a quick trip to the nearest home decor store, and this apartment would be perfect," Ali said before she was suddenly blinded by the sunlight as he pulled off the covers from above them. She tossed him a glare through squinted eyes, while he urgently rummaged through his dresser for some clothes. She sat up and watched him curiously. "You forget about some important appointment or something?"

Sawyer looked her way as he slipped on his pants, then threw an outfit she had previously worn to his place a few days before on the bed in front of her. "No. Get dressed. I washed that for you."

"Okay, where are we going in such a rush?"

"The home decor store."

"Oh," she murmured, then slowly climbed out of bed and put on her clothes. He disappeared into the kitchen to quickly eat breakfast, while she sat in the living room with a deeply pensive look on her face.

He then appeared in front of her, car keys in hand, and nodded his head toward the door. "Ready?"

Ali pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes at him for a second. "Um, yeah, just a quick question. When you say we're going to the home decor store, what do you mean by that exactly? I just don't want to assume anything here."

"I mean we're going to the home decor store."

"No, yeah, right. I got that."

"Okay."

"Okay," she echoed as they both stared at each other. As always, his

expression was undecipherable, and after a moment, she gave up on trying to read him with a huff. She stood from the couch and walked with him towards the door. He held it open for her as she slipped on her shoes, but before she stepped out into the hall, she stopped to give him a questioning look. "So—"

"I want you to move in with me," Sawyer interrupted abruptly, and she gaped at him in surprise.

"Wait. You want to live together?" she asked quietly as she cast down her eyes, thinking. It had almost been a year now since they started dating, and she already spent most of her time here.

"Yeah. You've said you don't want to live in Nina's house because it's too hard, so why not live with me? We have the same job, so it'd be efficient," he reasoned, and she glanced up at him with an amused smile hanging from her lips.

"Okay, but it's not all about efficiency, Sawyer. Us living together is a huge step in our relationship, are you sure you're ready for that?"

Sawyer nodded firmly, having already contemplated this decision for a while. "Yes. Are you?"

"Well..." Ali trailed off. He gazed at her carefully as she mulled it over, absently fidgeting with her fingernails. Her eyes returned to his after another minute, and his heartbeat quickened upon seeing the grin that bloomed across her face. "Since you've given me complete authority over the home decor, how could I say no?"

She stepped forward to cup his cheeks before their lips collided in a slow, passionate frenzy. His hands had begun sliding underneath her shirt while she glanced down to reach for his pants. Then she froze, with him following short after her.

They both blinked like deers caught in headlights as they stared at the little girl in pigtails across from his apartment door, which was still wide open. The three of them exchanged awkward looks, then the couple quickly detached from each other and adjusted their clothing.

After another moment of excruciating silence, Sawyer stepped forward and nonchalantly walked down the hall. Ali chuckled awkwardly, closing the door behind her, and waved to the little girl before she chased after him.

"Remember to close the door next time you want to make out, Alice," Sawyer said, and she gave him a flat look.

"Yeah, keep talking before I blow all of our money on home decor."

38 - his confession

Living together was an even easier transition than they thought it'd be. They were already familiar with each other's habits, and they had quickly established a routine that worked for both of them.

She recognized the days where he needed some space by his behavior in the morning. He'd usually wake up earlier, go for a quick run, then hyper-fixate on his job for the majority of the day. She wouldn't disturb him, but instead waited for him to come to her —which he always inevitably would.

He, too, was learning her boundaries and trying his best to respect them, despite his difficulty with recognizing rules and understanding their purpose.

However, like any other couple, they had their issues every once in a while.

There was a time where a man flirted with her at work, and he acted very irrationally against the customer in spite of her efforts to stop him. She was upset with him for the next few days after he refused to apologize for how carelessly he treated her in that situation, lacking any shame for his reckless actions. They eventually came to a compromise in which he promised he'd be more considerate next time, and since he still couldn't earnestly apologize, he'd have to do all of the housework for the next two weeks instead.

He had also been annoyed with her a few times too, especially when she didn't let him manipulate someone once. She had intentionally interrupted him when he was mid-sentence, then proceeded to change the subject altogether. He didn't speak a word to her for the rest of the day, and when she finally asked why, he told her that he did not wish to be restrained. He explained that if she kept trying to subdue him, then he would inevitably grow to harbor some resentment towards her. Neither of them wanted that,

so they agreed to both adjust their behaviors and do everything they could to prevent it from happening.

Living together certainly helped their relationship escalate into something even better than what they had before, an indication of a mature milestone. After all, there was always room for improvement.

Sawyer gazed at her as she watched TV, laying on her side with her legs across his lap on the couch. She was so fully immersed in the show that she didn't notice him looking at her for so long. He found her more and more beautiful with each passing day; she almost had an innately hypnotic effect over him.

"Damn, did you see that?" Ali asked as she briefly glanced over at him, then immediately looked back when she caught his unwavering gaze. A smile slowly crawled onto her face as she studied his deeply captivated expression. "What? What are you thinking about in there?"

He didn't respond for a moment as he recalled his conversation with Brady a while back, about a certain emotion he hadn't yet confessed to. Her attention returned to the TV when the screen flashed, but he easily captured it once again by leaning toward her. His hands teasingly glided up her body until it reached her face, which he gently caressed.

"Alice," he said softly, his face dangerously close to hers. Her eyes shot down to his lips as they brushed against hers, before she met his gaze again.

"Yes?"

Sawyer paused to tuck her hair behind her ears, then leaned his forehead against hers and closed his eyes. His voice was as toneless as usual, but it held a tenderness that was solely reserved for her. "I love you, Alice."

It was quiet for a moment, with only the sound of the TV in the background, and he opened his eyes to look down at her. She was smiling cheekily; he quirked an eyebrow at her. "I already know

that, Sawyer. You've said it a thousand times in your sleep. I don't know what took you so long to say it when you're awake."

"With everything that happened with Nina, I didn't think it was the right time."

"That's really thoughtful of you," Ali murmured, knowing how much of a development this was for him, as she lifted her face up to kiss him. She, too, had been holding back her feelings for a while now, in fear of overwhelming him when she knew that love was such a heavy subject. When she first came to terms with her own emotions, she became haunted with the idea that he would never be able to reciprocate it because of his inherent nature, but she always convinced herself to dismiss those thoughts as manifestations of her own insecurities.

Now that she was hearing the words come out of his mouth, fluidly and easily as if it were as tangible as the oxygen in their lungs, she was finally able to release the psychological weight on her mind and body. She swept her fingers through his hair and beamed up at him, eager to declare her love for him at long last. "I love you too, Sawyer."

He smiled as relief passed through them both, then suddenly scooped her up from the couch and embraced her tightly. She laughed in his ear, making his smile widen, and hugged him back.

"I'm so glad we met, Alice."

39 - the anniversary

a/n : we're nearing the end guys! comment here if you have any chapter ideas that you'd like to see, and maybe i'll use them.

One year.

It had been one year since the day he asked her to be her boyfriend, which was one of the few situations in his life where he could recall being genuinely nervous. His heart had pounded at a speed he believed to be unhealthy, and he was powerless to the anxiety that seethed in his stomach, despite his mind's attempts to soothe the unfamiliar feeling through logical reasoning.

In hindsight, he had begun to realize that these feelings—whether they were pleasant or not—were what aided him in his path to finally achieving some sense of normalcy. He sensed it in specks and glimmers, easily drawing his attention as faint as they were because of their utter absence from his life beforehand.

It was only natural to give credit to the person in his life who was able to arouse these buried emotions through something as simple as kindness.

"Happy anniversary, Alice," he whispered into her ear after wrapping his arms around her, stirring her awake.

She blinked, struggling to regain consciousness, having spent hours tidying her grandmother's residence for an open house after an eight hour shift to help pay her share of rent. Nina had left her a fairly generous sum of money, but she wanted to respect her late grandmother's wishes and set the money aside for either the completion of her college degree or an all expenses paid trip across the world—both of which her grandmother had dreamt of having when she was younger.

Ali drowsily forced her eyes to latch onto him, confusion etched on

her face. "What? Anniversary? What time is it?"

"Midnight."

"Midnight," she echoed quietly as the word failed to hold significance to her for a moment. Just as she began to sink back into the weightless arms of sleep, her eyes flew open and turned to him wildly. He had watched her expression for the entire three minutes it took for her to come to the realization, adorning an amused smile that only grew wider. She lifted herself up from the bed, blinking vigorously against the darkness and patting the mattress in search of his hand. "Sawyer, it's our anniversary. Let's drink champagne or something."

He eyed her disheveled state, stifling a laugh upon hearing her slurred speech. "We don't have any champagne."

"And why not?"

"Because neither of us are 21 yet."

She paused and regarded him with a deeply muddled look. "I thought the legal age was 18."

"We live in the U.S., Alice," Sawyer said slowly, and she gaped at him as if it was the first time she was made aware of that reality. She raised a hand to itch her head, then abruptly stood to flick on the light.

"Well, apple juice is good too. Or maybe I can look up how to make a mock cocktail, wouldn't that be pretty festive?" Ali suggested groggily as she wobbled over to the light switch, unable to content herself with sleeping now regardless of the fact that they had plans later in the day as well. She opened her mouth to continue, but was completely taken by surprise when the whole room lit up, even though she was the one who had done so. "Jesus Christ, that is so bright. I can't see, I can't see."

Warm arms enclosed around her body as the darkness returned, much to her tired eye's relief. Sawyer carried her back to bed and slipped in beside her, adjusting the covers around them. "We can

make them in the morning. Go back to sleep."

"Sleep? On our anniversary? Who does that?"

"Me. Let me sleep in peace," he said as he closed his eyes and faked a yawn. She peered at him through hooded eyes and reluctantly caved in.

"Fine. Only because *you* want to, not me."

Sawyer nodded, a shadow of a smile still remaining on his lips, and welcomed her in his arms. She rested her head beneath his chin while his hands traced abstract shapes along her bare back. A few silent moments passed; he assumed she was asleep again and prepared himself to succumb to the stillness too.

"I love you, Sawyer. Happy one year," Ali murmured against his skin, half-asleep.

He tried to calm his giddy heart, afraid it would disturb her, as an uncontrollable smile crept onto his face. Flashes of memories of what they had gone through and what dormant feelings were evoked through it all played out in his mind. Every laugh, every smile, every frown, every argument, every celebration, and every moment of peace had led them to where they were now. He was beyond thankful for the developments she helped initiate thus far, and yet, he was still unbearably dissatisfied.

A year was not enough, he realized, to fully relish in and grasp the multitude of emotions that she bestowed upon him every day. And even if the day ever came that he somehow did have enough, he would willingly spend the rest of his life gifting her tenfold what she had already gifted him in such a short amount of time.

He didn't know what the future held, but he knew he'd fight to stay in the shining light that went by the name of Alice—instead of returning to the lackluster darkness that he had been confined to for years.

"I love you. I hope this anniversary is the first of many," Sawyer murmured back, pressing a kiss to her head, and she hummed in

approval. They fell asleep soon after, sucked into blissful dreams that reflected their everlasting affections for each other.

365 days suddenly seemed so minuscule in comparison to the magnitude of their love.

40 - first guests

Ali stood back as she finished setting the dinner table, scrutinizing her work. A moment later, she stepped aside and watched him place each freshly prepared bowl on their designated placemats.

"God, that smells good," Ali sighed dreamily, longing to sit down and devour everything inside of the bowls immediately. He pulled out his phone from his back pocket to check the time, then cast her a bored look.

"I'm not waiting for more than three minutes," Sawyer warned, albeit he actually meant a minute, and she waved her hand dismissively. As soon as he was about to plop down on a chair, there was a loud knock at their front door.

Ali rushed to the foyer, glancing back at him with an animated smile, before swinging the door open.

"City girl!" Brady exclaimed as he embraced her tightly, stepping past the threshold. He lowered his voice as he whispered into her ear: "Remind me to never accept another ride from Marina again. Her music taste made the urge to hurl myself out of the window grow stronger with every song."

Ali stifled a laugh as she pulled away from him, meeting his truly tortured eyes. Marina, too, stepped inside and smiled obliviously. "Hey, Ali. I brought you this non-alcoholic sparkling wine, I used to get it when I was underage and it's honestly tastier than the real thing."

"I, however, did bring the real thing because I *am* 21," Brady remarked, holding up the dark, elegant bottle like it was an award.

"You're older than me?" Ali asked incredulously, turning to toss Sawyer a questioning look as he appeared behind her. "Did you know this? Am I the only one who finds it surprising?"

"No," Sawyer replied, which made Brady wrinkle his nose in thought, but he wasn't allowed the time to further ruminate on the matter. "The food is getting cold."

"Right. Come on in, guys. Leave your shoes and coats here," Ali said with a naturally hospitable smile as she walked back into the dining room. Sawyer sat beside her at the table and waited impatiently for their two guests to be seated. He was very clearly not accustomed to having visitors, nor did he like it, but he had reluctantly agreed to it after learning how much it would mean to her.

"The place looks so nice and cozy. I love the paintings and the little decorative objects," Marina complimented as her eyes darted around, slowly settling down onto the seat across from Ali. "I assume this was your doing, Ali? Your knack for patterns and colors would be useful in designing a new look for the department store soon."

Brady groaned in protest, roughly planting himself on the chair next to his supervisor. "And your knack for bringing up work in every situation would be useful in nothing, Marina."

"Let's eat before it's cold!" Ali quickly interjected before their bickering began, and Sawyer grunted with approval. A moment of silence rolled over them as they lifted their spoons to their lips and swallowed, then hastily repeated the process with great vigor.

"This is delicious! Did you make this yourself?" Marina asked Ali in between bites.

"No, actually, Sawyer did," Ali answered with a proud grin. "He's a much better cook than I am."

"Nothing can beat candy, but this is real close. What's it called?" Brady inquired of Sawyer, who peered at him briefly through his dark eyelashes.

"Udon soup with bok choy, scallions, egg, and chicken."

Brady blinked. "I don't even know what half of those things are."

"I bet you can name all the existing lollipop flavors and the best

brands in a heartbeat though," Marina muttered under her breath, which was supposed to come out as derisive, but he seemed flattered instead.

After dinner, Ali took their bowls away and brought back a tray of homemade brownies—recipe courtesy of her grandmother. She offered to warm them up and place a scoop of ice cream on top if anyone was interested, which Brady gladly accepted. Their conversation was lighthearted and casual as they ate the brownies, but as soon as Sawyer left to use the bathroom, her two coworkers leaned over the table with glaring curiosity.

"So tell us, city girl, what's it like living together with—" Brady whipped his head back to double check if they were alone, then whispered slowly: "*Sawyer*."

"Oh, it's good," she responded plainly, nodding. She watched with furrowed eyebrows as both of her coworkers' faces morphed into one of impatience.

"That's it? Tell us more, Ali! Where are the details?" Marina huffed in exasperation, while Brady unknowingly mirrored the frown on her face.

Ali chuckled and pushed away her empty plate from in front of her. "You guys are such gossips."

"Hurry up and spill before he comes back!" Brady scream-whispered, and she raised her hands in surrender upon being under their unwavering scrutiny.

"Alright, alright. Don't shoot," Ali joked, then cleared her throat when they merely continued to stare at her pointedly. "Well, personally, I'm pretty content with how things are. I think living together has taught us a lot more about each other, and although it sometimes leads to difficulties we otherwise wouldn't have had, I feel like it's worth it. Like, it's worth it to go through all of these things because it's making us grow closer and fall even more in love, you know? Because if everything was sunshine and rainbows all the time, then we wouldn't really realize just how precious the good moments are. That's my perspective, at least."

Marina stilled, rendered speechless by her heartwarming words. "That...That's beautiful, Ali."

Before anyone could utter another word, footsteps echoed throughout the apartment as he headed for the dining room. Brady and Marina instantly sat back in their seats and pretended to be mid-conversation when Sawyer returned.

Sawyer glanced over at the two, not the least bit fooled by their obviously fake conversation, then met the eyes of the person he truly cared about with every ounce of his being. She smiled, and like a man that was bewitched, he couldn't resist studying every intricate detail on her face—no matter how many times he had done so already. Ali pecked him on the lips and slid her hands down his face, constantly envious of his smooth skin. Her gentle touch and close proximity warmed his body. He went in for another kiss, and to his dismay, she cut it short a few seconds later.

"I'm going to go put the dishes in the dishwasher. How about you three move to the living room?" she suggested; Brady and Marina nodded as they stood from their chairs. After a look his way, he grudgingly led them into the living room without her.

An awkward silence swept over the three. Brady exchanged looks with Marina, who was absently tapping her foot against the floor. Sawyer then turned on the TV, erasing the silence, but the awkwardness remained.

Just as Brady and Marina began to grow interested in the nature documentary, Sawyer suddenly spoke. "I love her, you know."

"Who? The woman doing the voice-over?" Brady asked as they both averted their eyes from the screen.

"No. I love Alice," Sawyer clarified, staring at them intently. Marina pursed her lips but didn't say a word, while Brady nodded slowly and tentatively. "I know you don't believe me. I don't expect you to trust my words at all."

Marina looked away, momentarily unable to maintain eye contact with him. Sawyer knew why, of course; he remembered what he

was like when he first began working at the department store years ago. Although no one had been an exception to his relentless manipulation and duplicity at the time, Marina had always seemed to be the most affected by it.

Before his true nature was unveiled, she had sympathized with the troubled teen and held a certain tenderness for him that could even be described as familial. When the truth came to light, she had felt a sense of betrayal far greater than anyone else at the store—including Brady, who easily coped by treating himself to a family-size pack of lollipops.

Sawyer continued, keeping his voice low to ensure that only their ears could listen. "But I hope that my actions serve to make the truth behind my words clear to you both. Although you may be good friends to Alice, I don't expect either of you to force yourself to become friends with me, after everything I've done to you. All I want is for you to genuinely believe how much I love Alice—not for me, but for her, because I know your support and judgement would mean a lot to her."

Marina met his eyes again after hearing his words; a mixture of surprise and ambivalence written across her face. She firmly doubted he had ever felt remorse for the way he had treated her, but she was never sure if he was at least capable of acknowledging his wrongs and how he wounded her. What he said now—*after everything I've done to you*—was the small act of admission that she needed in order to achieve a comforting sense of finality.

Before either of them could respond, Ali reappeared and sat next to her boyfriend with a bright smile. "So what are you guys watching? Is this the rainforest episode?"

"I don't know, but I just saw a red frog that looks exactly like Marina when she's mad," Brady said, earning a shove from his supervisor and a laugh from Ali. The atmosphere instantly grew lighter in a matter of seconds, and soon they were all amicably conversing with each other, unperturbed by the once serious mood.

While her two coworkers argued about which rainforest animal they'd each be, Ali struck up a conversation with Sawyer. She

thanked him for agreeing to invite their first guests over, then whispered something in his ear. Brady and Marina, from their peripheral vision, watched as Sawyer clasped his arms around her and planted countless kisses all over her face. He pulled back to gaze at the smile forming on her face and the laugh bubbling in her throat before it escaped her mouth. In his eyes, it was more beautiful than anything the nature documentary could ever capture.

Brady and Marina resumed their conversation with a shadow of a smile on their faces, unable to resist the undeniable love that the two exuded.

41 - empty heart

Mr. Price was back.

Ali had received a text in the morning from Marina, warning her of his visit and letting her be the one to inform his son. She wasn't entirely sure how to go about it, and she tried to procrastinate as long as she possibly could.

She fidgeted with her hands as she absently gazed out of the car window, her mind elsewhere. She was nervous about his reaction; this was the first time he would be seeing his father since they started dating. Mr. Price had been incredibly busy the last year—after all, he was building 30 new department stores across several states and discussing international expansions. They both had a lot to catch up on, especially since Sawyer had decided to leave his new relationship status a secret while he was gone.

"Alice," Sawyer said as he wrapped his hand around her clenched fist, drawing her attention. She blinked, momentarily dazed, and realized they had arrived at the store already. He gently opened up her fist and laced their fingers together, staring at her keenly. "What are you thinking about?"

She pursed her lips before exhaling sharply. "I got a text from Marina this morning. She said your father is coming today. He might already be inside."

There was no visible reaction on his face, but his grip on her hand loosened slightly. Wordlessly, he took a quick look around the parking lot around them; she watched as his eyes finally settled on something behind her, making him tense in his seat. He didn't say anything for a few seconds, and she desperately wished she could see the thoughts shooting across his mind.

"Will you be alright, Sawyer?" Ali asked softly, squeezing his hand as a sign of support.

He nodded, avoiding eye contact, and quickly squeezed her hand back before climbing out of the car. She followed suit, watching him from the corner of her eye as they walked into the store together. As if by psychic forces, Mr. Price stepped out of his office and immediately met his son's eyes the second they came in.

A wide, charming smile crawled onto his face as he opened his arms. "Ah, there's the unbeatable customer service duo! You two have been doing some great work this past year, I'm glad to finally be here to commend you both in person. How have you been, Ali? Have you gotten used to the small town life yet?"

"Yes, I've been doing really great. This place has definitely grown on me," she replied with a smile that rivaled his own. "And how are you, Mr. Price? I've heard that business is going well with your expansion plans, congrats."

"Thank you! It's cost me a year's worth of sleep, but I'm very happy with the results," he said before glancing over at his son, who had been staring at him since the moment he appeared. "Ali, if you could please handle customer service while I have a quick conversation with my son, that would be fantastic."

Before she could respond, the two men disappeared into his office, shutting the door behind them. Ali stood there idly for a moment, then quickly scurried over to her station.

She checked the time every couple of minutes while attempting to distract herself with work. Marina, as she was making her rounds, noticed the countless worried glances directed at the office. She walked over to her with a pointed look. "You're going to sprain your neck if you keep looking back every ten seconds, Ali."

"Sorry," Ali said sheepishly, then let out a heavy sigh. "I know I'm just being impatient, but damn, it feels like they've been in there for *hours*."

"Well, they have a lot to talk about, don't they? It's logical, Ali. It's not a telltale sign of anything bad, so don't waste your energy on worrying about it just yet. Besides, you know Sawyer can handle his own," Marina reasoned as she mechanically organized the items

along the counter in between them. With great reluctance, Ali nodded and forced herself to stop thinking about it, with the help of Brady's company whenever their supervisor wasn't looking.

Five lollipops and ten Marina scoldings later, the door to Mr. Price's office flew open with an echoing thud. Ali instantly jolted up from her seat and watched as a disheveled Sawyer looked around wildly. Even from afar, she could see the hostile expression on his face, and when his gaze finally landed on her, she immediately felt unsettled. He softened momentarily before abruptly turning around and storming out of the store.

Ali quickly checked the time—she still had two hours left of her shift—then turned to Marina for permission, who nodded in understanding. Ali picked up her stuff in a rush and made way for the exit, passing by Mr. Price's open office in the process. He was sitting at his desk with his chin resting on his hands and a tense air circling around him; he and Ali briefly made eye contact, and for the first time, he didn't smile upon seeing her.

She shrugged it off and ran outside, finding Sawyer leaning his head against the car with his fists clenched in the parking lot. She tilted her head to try to get a look at him and reached out to touch his shoulder. "Hey, what—"

"Leave me alone, Alice," he cut her off, icy irritation laced in his tone. He had never spoken to her this way; even in heated moments between them, his voice would always be flat and void of emotion.

She retracted her hand and frowned. "Sawyer, I'm just asking you what happened in there. Did you tell your dad about us?"

"I don't want to talk to you right now," he said harshly, ignoring her question. She took a step back and peered at him for a moment, trying to decide what would be the best plan of action for the both of them. Usually, in times of stress, he simply needed some space for a while and she was always willing to give him that.

"Okay, I understand. Let's just go home and cool off before we talk then?" Ali suggested gently, once again reaching out to him, but he moved away. He kept his head down the entire time, deterring her

from catching any glimpse of his face—specifically, the tortured expression on it.

"No. I don't want to talk about it at all."

Ali narrowed her eyes at him but kept her voice calm and steady. "Well, that's not possible, Sawyer. You have to tell me at some point because it's about *us*, it affects *both* of us. Especially since your dad is my boss too."

He didn't respond, and she sighed quietly. Her voice lowered to a tone that always seemed to pull at his heartstrings due to its natural softness, warmth, and overt vulnerability. "We've talked about this before, Sawyer. You know, about how important communication is in a relationship because if you're not willing to communicate things with your partner in a healthy manner, then you shouldn't be in a relationship to begin with. That's what a good partner does, we owe that to each other."

Sawyer stiffened when he realized his own incompetence at that moment, and his body began to grow hot from an overwhelming amount of guilt swarming his senses for the first time in his life. In his mind, she had just insinuated that he was not a good partner to her, and it sent him over the edge when he was already hanging from a mere branch.

"Then maybe we shouldn't be in a relationship," Sawyer suddenly exclaimed as he finally lifted his head up to meet her eyes.

His words rendered her speechless for a moment, but the expression on her face was enough to show him the gravity of what he had just done. Regret sunk its piercing teeth into him, but he was too overwhelmed with anger to push it away before it left its mark.

Instead, he opened the car door and drove home with an empty passenger seat and an empty heart.

42 - have faith

It took her about three minutes to recover from the shock of the situation and realize what had happened. She looked around the parking lot, uncertain of what to do or how to react, as various questions rang in her head. Did he really mean what he said? Did they just break up? How is she going to get home without a car?

After another moment of deliberation, she walked back into the store and looked for her supervisor. From the corner of her eye, she noticed that Mr. Price was no longer in his office and hoped that they wouldn't bump into each other now.

Marina's eyebrows first rose upon seeing her before they furrowed with concern. "Hey, you alright? I thought you were leaving with Sawyer."

"He left without me," Ali stated, and before Marina could express her candid disapproval, she continued. "Does your shift end soon? Could you give me a ride home?"

"Yeah, of course, but are you sure you want to go there instead of stay at my place? You look shaken, Ali. And it seems like Sawyer isn't in the best state of mind right now either if he just left you like that."

Ali pulled her tote bag closer to her and cleared her throat awkwardly. She was struggling to keep her feelings in check, but she refused to break down in the middle of her workplace. "Yeah, but I'll be alright. I'm going to go sit outside until your shift ends. I need some fresh air."

"Okay," Marina replied hesitantly, concern etched across her face. "I'll call in a favor and get out earlier, so give me a couple of minutes. Text me if you need anything."

Ali nodded and returned to the parking lot, settling on the curb beside Marina's car. Her mind inevitably began to think about what

had just transpired a couple of minutes ago, and her eyes watered despite her wishes. She rubbed her face with her hands, thankful that she hadn't worn any makeup today, and tried to steady her breathing.

"Have a good rest of your day, Mr. Price!" someone shouted from inside of the store, catching her attention. Her eyes shot to the entrance, where the eminent man appeared with a briefcase in hand and a charming smile adorning his stubbled face. He waved to whoever had called out to him, then turned around and started towards his vehicle. Oblivious to her watchful gaze, he let his guard down.

Ali's eyes widened when Mr. Price's face relaxed into a familiarly cold expression as he stared ahead blankly. She continued to watch him in absolute shock until he drove off without noticing her at all.

She blinked, dazed, but was unable to fully process the situation when Marina materialized beside her. The redhead offered her a hand to stand, then unlocked the car and turned on some soothing music. Neither of them spoke during the ride; Marina respected Ali's current need for calm and Ali appreciated her ability to understand without it being said.

When they reached Ali's apartment complex, Marina attempted to invite her to stay at her place once more, but she politely declined. She forced a small smile as she waved goodbye, then entered the building. Once she arrived at her door, she paused for a moment.

Although her eyes had watered in the parking lot earlier, she thought she was otherwise handling the situation rather well. But when she pulled out her keys and inserted them into the lock, she realized that she was trembling.

Taking a deep breath, Ali unlocked the door and stepped inside. As she expected, he wasn't in the living room or the kitchen, but both his shoes and keys were by the door. She locked the door behind her and walked into the kitchen to place her tote bag on the counter. She grabbed a water bottle from the fridge, for something to busy herself with rather than for thirst.

After a moment, she placed her open water bottle on the counter and barged into their bedroom before she could stop herself, knowing that he would be there. He was sitting on the edge of the bed, staring down at the ground, but he looked up in surprise when she came in. They stared at each other in silence for what seemed like hours, only a few feet apart.

Most of the time, she was the one who first talked after a fight, but today was different. The weight of his words were too heavy on her heart this time.

She broke eye contact and walked past him to get to the closet, grabbing whatever clothes she saw first. He watched her carefully and wordlessly until she left the room without another glance at him.

Ali locked herself inside of the bathroom and instinctively began to change out of her work clothes. It was only when she stopped and looked at herself in the mirror did she notice that she was crying.

Part of dating a sociopath meant getting used to their callousness and lack of facial expressions, but sometimes it was too difficult to not feel heartbroken by it. After all, how could he have said those words with no remorse, so easily? And then look completely unfazed afterwards? She knew for certain that she wasn't capable of ever doing that to him. She now wondered if he truly could break up with her and feel nothing after, while she suffered enough for the both of them.

Ali shook her head vigorously, knowing that she couldn't let herself spiral. She put her hair up and washed her face; by the time she was done doing her skincare routine, her eyes were less swollen.

Satisfied, she opened the door and was immediately taken aback when she saw him waiting for her. He stood there for a moment, as if expecting her to say something, then quickly held out an arm to stop her when she attempted to step away from him.

"I didn't mean it," Sawyer said hurriedly, and she looked up at him

with a solemn face. She felt like her emotions were about to spill over at any moment now, but she forced it all down because she hated crying in front of others. In truth, she hated the act of crying in general, since it's something she's had enough of for lifetimes.

"Then why did you say it?"

He averted his gaze for a quick second. "My father."

"Since when can your father make you do anything, Sawyer?" Ali questioned, then sighed upon hearing her own impatient tone. She pushed past him and sat down on the couch, urging him to follow. Once they both got comfortable, she peered at him across from her. "So tell me what he said to you."

"After I told him about us, he said that we would never work out. He said that I'm not capable of taking care of you, of loving you, or treating you well because of how I am. And that at some point, you'll just grow tired and leave me," Sawyer said, watching as the frown on her face deepened. "Not only that, but he said that I'm deluding myself into thinking that I'm in love because it's not possible and that I should break up with you now to save you the heartbreak."

Ali paused, registering his words, before she spoke. "And do you think that's true?"

"No," he answered firmly, searching her eyes for any hint of disbelief. "No, Alice, I don't. I *know* that I'm in love with you. I've never doubted it from the moment I realized it."

"Then that still doesn't explain why you said we shouldn't be in a relationship, Sawyer. You disagreed with your father, yet you were about to do exactly what he wanted you to do. I don't understand."

Sawyer, once again, felt that ache called guilt in the depths of his stomach. And this time, he allowed her to see the tortured expression on his face. "My father had told me that I would treat you badly because I'm incapable of controlling myself or going against my nature, and I did find myself struggling in that moment. I was angry that I was proving him right, and angry that I couldn't

be a better partner to you, and then angry that I couldn't control the impulse to respond that way to you when I didn't mean it at all."

Ali, reaching her breaking point, opened her mouth to respond regardless of the fact that her lips had begun to quiver. "But *I* have never said that you were a bad partner, Sawyer. Why would you believe your *father*, who has never even seen us together until today, over *me*? He wasn't here when you took care of me when my grandma died, he wasn't here all those times you've shown me how much you love me through words or gifts or dates, and he wasn't here for each morning and night when you treat me with the most affection I've ever experienced in any of my relationships. How could one altercation make you forget all of that?"

"If all it takes to make you rethink our entire relationship are a few bitter and ignorant words from someone who doesn't even know us, then how am I supposed to believe you have any type of faith in us? And why would you leave me alone in that parking lot knowing that I can't afford to Uber now that rent was raised?" Ali cried, unaware that she had stood from the couch with hands swinging and hot tears streaming down her face as she spoke. It was silent for a long moment as her chest heaved with each breath and her eyes that glistened with tears bored into his cold ones.

And then he spoke.

"I'm sorry, Alice," Sawyer whispered, his voice matching her shakiness. When he stood from the couch and wrapped himself around her, she couldn't help but clutch him closer. "I'm so sorry, Alice. I didn't forget any of it, I will never forget. I do have faith in us. Please believe me. I'm sorry for making you cry."

"I just want you to feel confident about us, Sawyer. No doubts, no insecurities," she said softly as he felt her tears seep into his T-shirt. "You're the best partner I've ever had. I wouldn't choose anyone else over you. Believe me."

"I do believe you, Alice, and I wouldn't either. I promise I won't ever doubt us again. I want us to be together for as long as you'll take me, Alice," Sawyer murmured in her ear.

Just as she was about to reply, Ali froze in place when she heard him sniffle, then swiftly recoiled to look at him. A single tear was running down his cheek, the first of his she's ever seen.

She smiled tenderly as she wiped his tear with her hand, then pecked the spot on his cheek. "Well, I want us to be together forever, so..."

"Sounds good to me," he replied assuredly, leaning in to kiss her. "I already know I'll love you forever."

"Yeah, how could you not?" Ali said playfully, meeting his lips, and he hummed in agreement against her mouth. He cupped her dampened cheek as they kissed, pouring enough fervor into the gesture that she knew it was his way of sealing their promise to each other.

"And about the Uber thing," Sawyer remarked as he momentarily broke away from her. "I'm going to convince Marina and my father to give us a sufficient raise. We're the reason our location has the best rating thus far, so they have to agree it's well deserved, don't you think?"

Ali grinned. "Even if it wasn't well deserved, I'm sure you'd still find a way to convince them anyhow. It is your superpower, after all."

a/n: hi again. been a while. i hope this double update helps make up for it. here's a warning though — there will only be *about 3 chapters left* of this story, so prepare yourself. thank you for reading!

43 - the pier

It was their five year anniversary.

It had been a long and arduous journey to get to where they were today, and although they weren't perfect, they were happy. They were completely secure with each other now, so much so that issues that would've otherwise been difficult to resolve were now confronted with a fluidity that only time—along with unremitting patience—could have granted.

Ali and Sawyer climbed out of their car and walked hand in hand down the long, familiar pier. It was the same pier where they made their original deal, the same pier where she heard him laugh for the first time, the same pier where they had their first kiss, the same pier where he first looked into her eyes, and the same pier where he asked if he could be her boyfriend. Over the years, it had become their go-to spot, ridden with some of their dearest memories.

She plopped down on a bench that perfectly overlooked the waveless ocean and glanced around the empty pier. There were only two other people there besides them, and both the ocean and wind seemed to miraculously be at peace today, which was rare in itself.

Sawyer sat down next to her and let his eyes wash over her for a moment. She was wearing a dress that she bought last week when she went shopping with Marina and Brady, and her skin glowed in the sun in a way that could convince someone that it had only emerged from the clouds for her. When she caught his lingering gaze, she bestowed such an irresistible smile upon him that it unconsciously made one crawl onto his own face.

"Do you remember the first time we went out?" Ali asked him as she thought back to when she had first moved here. "Do you remember that deal we made? No lying to me in exchange for going out with you?"

He nodded.

She paused, her eyes drifting off along with her mind. When she spoke again, her voice was strangely quiet, as if she was only talking to herself. "You could've lied to me about not lying, you know."

"I know."

"So why didn't you?" Ali pressed, averting her gaze from the ocean and returning to him. He met her eyes—endlessly entranced by the battle between green and brown in her irises—and wondered why she had taken so long to bring up the question.

"I guess I'm a sociopath that likes to keep my word," he answered casually.

"Hm," she murmured, obviously discontent with his lacking response.

"Or," Sawyer continued, his voice lowering as well, while she stared at him keenly. "Maybe I'm a sociopath that wanted to know what it felt like to never lie to someone."

A small smile surfaced on her lips. "And? how does it feel?"

"Refreshing," he admitted, and she nudged him enthusiastically, inciting a quiet chuckle from him. "But only because it's with you. I can't promise I'll stop lying to everyone else too."

"I know, I know. I wouldn't ask you to make that big of a change, especially when it's just who you are, right?"

"Yeah. It doesn't bother you sometimes though? I thought it'd be embarrassing at times," he asked her, and she shrugged.

"Obviously I don't think it's good to lie about *everything*, but... I honestly think it's so interesting what you do. What you're capable of. Is that weird?"

"Yes," Sawyer said honestly; her lips pressed together to form a thin line out of embarrassment. He took her hand and squeezed it gently

in an attempt to console her. "Maybe that's why we're so good together, we're both a little screwed up in the head."

"*Or*," Ali began as she straightened and put her other hand over his with a doll-like smile sprawled across her face. "Maybe the only reason I don't think it's weird is because I'm a sociopath too and I've actually been manipulating you and everyone else this entire time."

They both fell silent for a moment as they stared at each other, his eyes flickering between her eyes and her smile.

Then they burst into laughter.

"Okay, but you have to admit, that'd be a crazy plot twist," Ali said in between laughs, and he nodded.

She continued to chuckle lightly as she looked away from him and towards the ocean, which remained peacefully still. He studied her face, absent of any worries or anxieties and mirroring the serenity of their surroundings. He couldn't believe they've been together for five years already, while simultaneously feeling like it's been much longer. Every day he was with her was a blessing for him, and he only wished to gift her the same amount of happiness and kindness she's gifted him.

"Alice, about that deal we made. I have to confess something," Sawyer suddenly said, catching her attention. "Up until today, I have never lied to you about anything. And I can promise you that was the last time I'll ever lie to you."

Ali furrowed her eyebrows in confusion. "Wait, what did you lie about?"

"I lied about why we're here," he replied, and before she could ask any further questions, he stood from the bench. She warily accepted his hand for help to get on her feet, then threw him a questioning look when she was standing up in front of him.

"These last five years have been the best years of my life, Alice. Genuinely. Ever since my mom died when I was ten, I've lacked some light in my life, until you came along," Sawyer said as he held

her hands, a tender smile hanging from his lips and nothing but affection sparkling in his eyes. "We've given each other our all, but I still want to give you more. So much more because what you've selflessly given me has been immeasurable. And I know I struggle with making long-term plans, but I promise you I will commit to this plan if you agree to it."

Ali's eyes widened as Sawyer let go of her hands and slowly bent down on one knee.

"We're not here to celebrate our five year anniversary, Alice."

"Yeah, I'm kind of getting the memo now," Ali said breathlessly, and he laughed lightly.

Sawyer cleared his throat, pulling out a small box from his pocket, before meeting her watery eyes again. "Alice, I love you. I know our relationship hasn't been easy from the very start, but I wouldn't trade it for anything. I promise to care for you and be there for you every day, if you'll let me."

He opened the box, revealing the shining ring inside of it.

"Will you marry me, Alice? Can I please be your husband?"

Ali gazed down at him with wide eyes, stunned. Both of their hearts hammered against their chests as they stared at each other. His eyes momentarily dropped down to her dress when the wind suddenly picked up, causing both her hair and her dress to gracefully flow through the air underneath the sunlight. For a moment, it felt like he was proposing to an actual angel.

"Yes," Ali answered with a grin as she eagerly pulled him up to his feet. "Of course I will!"

Sawyer quickly grabbed onto the railing of the pier to steady himself when she crashed her lips onto his and enveloped him in a hug, forgetting the ring. She saw a flash of light from the corner of her eye that same second and whipped her head around to find the culprit.

"They're photographers," Sawyer told her, referring to the only two

other people on the pier with them. "I hired them because you said you really wanted your grandmother to see these type of moments. Now you'll have a picture to show her when you visit her grave."

Ali immediately teared up upon hearing his words and hugged him again. "Thank you so much, Sawyer. I'm so grateful."

Once she finally tore away from him, he slipped the ring onto her finger and kissed her properly—making her stomach turn as if it was their first kiss all over again. The ocean, as if in sync with her body, began to stir as harsh waves rolled beneath them.

Even the photographers couldn't resist a smile as they watched the happy engaged couple kiss.

44 - the party

A/N: we were number one in teen fiction a while ago, and i wasn't able to thank you all yet. here's a double update to show my gratitude!

It was their engagement party.

Ali was walking around the long dinner table, adjusting the plates and utensils, while Sawyer was thanking the restaurant owner once more. He was able to convince the owner to close it for the rest of the night for them; Ali could only imagine how he managed to do so.

She glanced behind her at the two-person table, and her lips slowly lifted into a nostalgic smile. This was the same restaurant where they went out together for the first time, and although he had invited her merely for keeping up appearances at the time, it was still a precious memory for her. After all, that day was what kickstarted everything between them.

His hand snaked around her waist, and she averted her eyes from the memorable table to look up at him. He smiled knowingly, having picked this restaurant himself, before pressing a small kiss to her forehead. His other hand was fiddling absently with her engagement ring on her finger, obliviously sending electrifying chills down her spine. She reached up to squish his cheeks together —a new habit of hers that he reluctantly allowed because of how much it entertained her to see how it contrasted with his emotionless face.

The two of them blinked back in surprise when a flash of light momentarily blinded them, followed by an excited squeal. The redheaded supervisor smiled sheepishly at the startled couple, then held up her phone to show them the picture. "Sorry about that, but I had to capture the moment. You guys are so cute."

"Hi, Marina," Ali chuckled lightly as she tore away from Sawyer and enveloped her in a hug. She then took a closer look at the picture and made an aww-ing sound. "Can you send me that please? Sawyer looks adorable in that."

"You know what looks good in that picture?" Brady remarked suddenly, seemingly popping up out of nowhere. "That ring, girl, *damn*. Shinier than a freshly unwrapped lollipop."

Ali gasped and quickly embraced him, catching him by surprise. "Brady, I missed you. How was the candy convention?"

"Beyond amazing! I scheduled, like, three different dentist appointments as a precaution though. But I missed you too, city girl, and I brought you some of the high quality candy as an engagement gift," Brady said as he handed her the hot pink gift bag with great care. She took a peek inside and immediately caught a warm, chocolatey whiff that made her stomach hum with approval.

"That smells really good. Thank you so much, Brady."

Brady nodded, then craned his neck to look over at the groom-to-be. "And I made sure to add some dark chocolate in there too for you, Soy-soy. Yeah, that's right, I've seen you gobbling those up in the sweets section back at the store."

"Thanks, stalker," Sawyer replied, ignoring his cheeky nickname for him.

A moment later, Ali's father—Andre—walked into the restaurant and pulled his only daughter into a tight hug. Sawyer watched as the two of them greeted each other happily, his gaze lingering on the bright smile on his fiancée's face. Ever since Grandma Nina passed away, both father and daughter made an effort to grow closer, and he knew how much this newfound relationship with her father meant to her.

"Sawyer, how are you doing?" Andre asked him as he shook his hand. "I assume you're doing very well, considering how much has changed since the last time we spoke when you requested my blessing."

"Yes, I'm very glad she said yes."

Ali stepped in between the two of them and narrowed her eyes at them. "I didn't know you had asked my dad for his blessing. So how long have you known then?"

"He asked me about a month before he proposed, I believe. You thought your old dad couldn't keep a secret, huh?" Andre smirked smugly, and she shook her head.

"Well, anyway, I found this vintage T-shirt in a thrift shop of that jazz band you used to like. I've been meaning to give it to you. I forgot it in the car though, so I'll be right back," Ali said before gesturing everyone towards the table. "Hey, you guys can sit now. Feel free to try the appetizers."

She glanced over her shoulder as everyone settled down, then scurried outside into the parking lot. She quickly unlocked the car, then grabbed the shirt from the backseat. Her eyes caught her reflection in the rearview mirror, and she took a moment to fix up her curled hair.

Once she was satisfied, she rushed over to the entrance of the restaurant and stepped inside. She paused midway, whispering an obscenity under her breath, before stepping back out to lock her car.

And at that same moment, she spotted the eminent man climbing out of his own vehicle.

He looked up and locked eyes with her for a few seconds, then made his way towards her. She pursed her lips, surprised that he came regardless of the fact that she was the one who urged Sawyer to invite him. It had been a while since they had last seen each other; in fact, they hadn't seen each other since the incident that almost caused the couple to break up. Both father and son avoided each other after that.

"Hello, Mr. Price," Ali said as she stood in front of the entrance and crossed her arms. Neither of them wore their signature smiles, as opposed to any of their other interactions.

Mr. Price peered at her with a cryptic expression on his face. "Ali. I certainly didn't think that the next time I'd see you, you'd be engaged to my son."

"Might that have to do with the discussion you had with him the day he told you about us?" she asked calmly, her tone holding no hint of contempt yet also no amiability. Her words caught him off guard, she noted, although it wasn't so blatantly obvious. But after living with a sociopath for so long, even a slight twitch couldn't go undetected.

"So he told you about that," he replied with a sigh, while she continued to stare at him. His eyes quickly swept over their surroundings before returning to her and cocking his head slightly. "You puzzle me, Ali. Why are you willing to put in so much effort on a person like my son, with his condition? As his father, I know he is not easy to live with, so it makes me wonder why you would voluntarily choose to stay with him—potentially for the rest of your life, as a marriage usually promises."

"The reason is not so complicated as you may think, Mr. Price. I simply love him enough to accept his flaws, and instead of belittle him for it, I try to understand. I try to help when I can, or think of a way to compromise. Just as you would do for any issue that arises in a relationship, whether one has a mental disorder or not."

Mr. Price scoffed. "I see, so you claim that love fixes everything. If only it were so black and white. I suppose you and my son will learn the truth the hard way after a few years of marriage, and you'll both finally heed my words when you divorce."

Ali did not respond for a moment, internalizing the disgust that stirred within her, as she studied him. Much like his son, his expression was also unreadable, hidden behind a mask, but it was more difficult to conceal one's habits—especially when they were done unconsciously. Her eyes dropped to his left hand, where his thumb was absently rubbing against a phantom wedding band on his ring finger.

That was when the pieces started to come together.

"Have a good rest of your day, Mr. Price!" someone shouted from inside of the store, catching her attention. Her eyes shot to the entrance, where the eminent man appeared with a briefcase in hand and a charming smile adorning his stubbled face. He waved to whoever had called out to him, then turned around and started towards his vehicle. Oblivious to her watchful gaze, he let his guard down.

Ali's eyes widened when Mr. Price's face relaxed into a familiarly cold expression as he stared ahead blankly. She continued to watch him in absolute shock until he drove off without noticing her at all.

"Your wife," Ali suddenly said, causing his face to harden instantly. "You seem to be so certain of how my marriage will end, almost as if you've experienced it yourself with your wife."

"I lost my wife to a brain aneurysm, not to a divorce," he spat out, and she narrowed her eyes at him.

"Who's to say she wasn't planning on divorcing you before she died?"

Mr. Price recoiled, offended. "On what grounds—"

"On the grounds that you, too, are a sociopath."

45 - a game

"On the grounds that you, too, are a sociopath."

Mr. Price fell silent.

They watched each other as the tension grew between them until it reached an unbearable height.

Then, ever so gradually—almost hauntingly so—, his innocent demeanor crumbled and was replaced by an icy look. There was no point in hiding it now, he had realized. After all, now that she was undoubtedly marrying his son and she already had her suspicions of him, he no longer had any use of her.

"How did you know?" he questioned, his voice lacking the emotion he had perfected throughout the years.

Ali remained unfazed and levelheaded; none of this came as a surprise to her because it had already been the subject of her contemplation ever since that day.

She blew out a breath and scrunched her eyebrows in exasperation. "Why does that matter? What matters is the fact that you're trying to ruin your son's relationship simply because your own did not go as planned. And instead of using this experience to help our relationship prosper, you decide to discourage him, to anger him, then push him away entirely after years of doing it already. All the while you hid your shared condition from him, making him feel like he was undeserving of any kindness as if you were so different."

"It is better for him to feel alienated than to feel understood. He needed to learn how to blend in with the rest of society, just as I did, instead of grow comfortable with being himself since he was not alone," he argued robotically, and she let out a disbelieving laugh.

"Oh, I get it now. You belittle him because you belittle yourself. You don't see yourself as good enough, do you, Mr. Price?" Ali taunted him while he stared her down coldly. "And the second you passed down that mindset and viewed your son the same way as yourself, that was when you failed as a parent. I'm glad that I'm here now to reverse your teachings on Sawyer, who has only ever wanted to feel loved and accepted."

"My wife made me feel that way too, in the beginning," Mr. Price remarked as a glimpse of wistfulness flashed in his emotionless eyes. "You won't be able to withstand someone like us for too long, Ali. One day you'll grow tired and give up."

Ali chuckled quietly and shook her head. "You're wrong. Just because you and Sawyer have the same disorder does not mean you are the same person, along with me and your wife. Your experience is not universal."

She paused, softening a bit as she remembered the numerous times she had seen firsthand how people treat those that are different. The man before her did not become this way on his own, and although this did not absolve him from all of the blame, it reminded her of his humanity.

She sighed and let herself become less tense. "I truly am sorry about your wife, and I'm sorry about the events that led you to this perspective of yourself, but you *will* stop forcing your false ideologies on Sawyer from now on. I was the one that encouraged him to reach out to you, and I will gladly be the one to deter him from ever doing it again. Rest assured, either way, Sawyer will never lack any love or compassion in his life again."

He observed her with great attention as she spoke, recognizing the tenacity behind her words.

He did not agree with her words—he feared he couldn't even if he wanted to—yet he found himself faltering for a moment. Perhaps, he thought, she was right.

Perhaps for them, there was hope.

Regardless, even now, he did not regret his marriage, due to the temporary respite it had granted him. He hadn't considered the fact that maybe his son would too.

"Dad."

The two of them averted their gaze from each other and looked towards the voice. Sawyer stood at the entrance, the door ajar, as his eyes flickered between his fiancée and his father.

"You've been out here for a while, Alice," he informed her, and she nodded.

"Sorry, I was talking to your dad. We had a very meaningful conversation," she said vaguely, unwavering in her stance when he eyed her briefly.

"And did it end well?"

Ali smiled a bit at his question, then glanced over at the man behind her and shrugged. "I'll let him answer that."

The two Price men locked eyes. Two sociopaths—one who unapologetically did not hide his true nature, and one who did. The father's face had once again returned to its disguise, while the son didn't bother to change his own. Although bonded through blood and brain chemistry, they couldn't be more different from one another.

Finally, Mr. Price broke the silence as he plastered on one of his famous and well-rehearsed smiles. "Why wouldn't it go well, son? And why do you look so morose? Shouldn't we be celebrating right now?"

The fiancés exchanged looks, then both nodded in unison. Sawyer stepped aside to let his father by, watching him as he easily became the life of the party within seconds, before turning to his future wife.

Ali quickly pecked his cheek, then lowered her lips to his ear. "Everything is alright, Sawyer. Let's talk about it after dinner, okay? We deserve to celebrate."

He hesitated for a short moment, but ultimately agreed. They headed back into the restaurant hand in hand and joined their guests at the table.

They were all engaged in conversations as they ate, chatting in a cordial and relaxed manner. Mr. Price, who easily entertained everyone, seemed to waver a bit whenever Ali added to the conversation, now that he saw her in a new light. The difference was minimal, but for the two people who had interacted with him countless times and knew about the incident that occurred over a year ago, it did not go unnoticed.

While the two fathers and the groom-to-be began to speak about another topic, Brady and Marina quickly jumped to action.

"City girl," Brady whispered harshly as he moved his chair closer to her, with Marina trailing behind him. "You were out there talking to the boss all that time, right? It looks like you definitely made an impact. What'd you say to him?"

Ali shrugged casually, keeping her voice low to impede any unwanted listeners. "Just that Sawyer needed some love and acceptance in his life. Two things that aren't so difficult to give."

Brady and Marina both peeked at their sociopathic coworker and mulled over the subject. The lollipop lover sat back in his chair and momentarily zoned out before he spoke.

"Well, hear me out. I feel like that's pretty easy for you to say. You were never really manipulated by the gaslighting god, so you weren't hurt. To accept and love someone, even after they completely betrayed your trust, is probably one of the most conflicting concepts ever. I mean, how would you know if they actually deserve it? Marina knows what I'm talking about, don't you?" Brady asked her, and she slowly nodded.

"It's hard not to feel offended by his actions, and even more so when he doesn't seem to feel any remorse for them. It's different for you because he cares about you and your feelings, but that's not the case for us. It's really hard to accept someone like that, no matter their condition," Marina admitted quietly, while Ali listened intently

and respectfully to the both of them.

Brady sighed and casted down his eyes. "If we're being real, as much as I wish I could be the bigger person, I just can't find it in me most of the time. Call it pride, call it toxic masculinity, call it me being a bitter bitch, but it's hard as hell."

Ali gazed at them for a moment as their words sunk in. She understood their perspective, and she was aware of her own bias. She was aware of how lucky she was to have seen this side of Sawyer, to have been able to bring it out of him as it was buried deep inside. She was aware that without their bad experience with him, she wouldn't have been able to have a good experience.

After all, who would've warned her about the alluring boy who worked at customer support if not for them? Otherwise, she might've fallen victim to his deception and found herself in the same position as them too.

"You're right, honestly," Ali said, her voice soft yet strong, and they looked up at her in surprise. "I can't argue with you guys because I didn't have a similar experience with him whatsoever, but maybe that's the point. Because of my relationship with him, you now know that he's not some kind of monster; he's capable of love and kindness like the rest of us. Doesn't that help you see things differently?"

A small smile crept onto Marina's face as she stared at the hope and passion that glittered in her friend's eyes. She thought back to the candid picture she had taken of the couple when she walked into the restaurant, where Sawyer exuded a certain warmth that she had never seen before the city girl came along.

"Yeah," Marina then replied, speaking for both Brady and herself. "It does. We wouldn't even bother trying anymore if it wasn't for you."

"Especially me, because you know I'm not one to put effort into things unless coerced to," Brady added, inciting a chuckle from Ali and an eye roll from Marina.

"You don't even put effort into your job."

Brady waved his hand dismissively. "Don't talk about work after hours, miss manager. Anyway, you think they got some lollipops back there—"

Brady paused as he felt a tap on his shoulder, then turned to look behind him. His eyes widened at the sight before him, briefly frozen in disbelief.

To him, it was like the clouds had parted above them and the sun replaced the moon as it shone on the beautiful being with a golden lollipop in his hand, gifted by the gods. In reality, it was just Sawyer handing him a pineapple lollipop that he took from the front entrance of the restaurant in advance.

"For...me?" Brady whispered, his eyes watery, and Sawyer nodded wordlessly. Brady gently took it from his grasp, his hand trembling with emotion, while the rest of the table watched the interaction with confusion. A sniffle escaped from the sweet tooth as he tasted the blessed lollipop and looked up at the generous man. "Thank you, o great one. I will never forget this gift you have bestowed upon me. In return, you have my upmost respect for the rest of eternity."

Marina let out a huff in frustration. "So you're telling me that if I were to give you a lollipop, you would finally listen to me at work?"

"Most likely not, but you should still try," Brady quipped with a sly smirk, and she resisted the urge to strangle him. After that, the lighthearted conversations resumed naturally between everyone at the table.

Soon enough, all of the guests left for the night and congratulated the couple one last time. Andre hugged his daughter and thanked her for the T-shirt, while Mr. Price merely shook his son's hand and wished him well. Sawyer and Ali expressed their gratitude to the restaurant owner again before they, too, drove back home.

He waited until they were settled in the living room to ask about what happened tonight, giving her a moment to change out of her

clothes.

Once ready, she sat down beside him and inhaled deeply, wearing a solemn expression.

"Your father asked me tonight why I've stuck by you so far, and why I'm willing to stick by you for the rest of our lives. He continued to push on the idea that our relationship will only end in heartbreak," Ali said, watching as his face morphed into one of distaste, but she quickly raised her hands to calm him. "Just listen. Have you ever tried to figure out why he thinks that, Sawyer? Where he might be coming from?"

He shook his head.

She sighed, placing her hand on his. "Because he's gone through this before. He's basing it off of his own experience, and he's trying to prevent it from happening to you. In his own misguided way, he was trying to help."

Sawyer stared at her for a moment as she let him process this information for himself, connecting it with his past memories. His eyes were a dark, stormy color when he spoke, his voice slicing through the cold silence. "Did he admit it to you?"

She merely nodded in response, and he inhaled sharply through his nose. He stood up from the couch to pace around a bit, feeling like his whole life had been a lie — or worse: a game. A game in which his father was the one playing with the pieces as if he wasn't the inventor of the game itself.

"This is what it feels like to be manipulated then?" Sawyer remarked as he let out a humorless chuckle, the first she had ever heard from him. "Can't say it feels good."

Ali sighed deeply, leaning back against the couch. "Yeah, he's definitely not winning the best father award anytime soon."

"Actually, it appears that he could easily convince someone to give it to him with his obviously very honed skill set," he replied, while she flashed him an awkward smile. "Damn sociopaths. How do you

deal with me, Alice?"

Taken aback by his words, she blinked a couple times before an amused laugh escaped from her mouth. "This is really putting things into perspective for you, huh?"

"Yeah, I might even be cured," he joked, and her smile widened even more. She stared at him for a moment, in awe of how much he had changed. Years ago, he would have been livid upon hearing the news about his father, and he would've struggled to not take his anger out on her. But, as promised, he was never going to let that happen again.

"Come here," Ali murmured as she pat the spot beside her. She wrapped her arms around his body and smiled softly, exuding nothing but pure love and affection. Her engagement ring glittered underneath the light above them, but all he saw was the shining emotions that swirled in her irises. "You are nothing like your father. We'll prove that by living our happiest lives together from here on out. I promise you that. Okay, my future husband?"

A grin immediately surfaced on his face at her last words. "I'll believe anything you say when you call me that."

"So show me how much you believe me," she said, teasing him, and she let out a brief yelp when he suddenly lifted them off of the couch. Wordlessly, he dashed to their bedroom and flashed her a look that told her exactly how he was going to prove it — which he successfully did many times.

46 - everlasting love

"The day has finally come!" Brady exclaimed excitedly as Marina beamed with enthusiasm beside him.

"I know, I can barely contain myself," she said, keeping her eyes glued to the double doors in front of them.

"The world's largest candy store has finally been opened!" Brady announced, which caused her to swiftly cast her gaze upon him. He was scrolling through his phone with a wide grin and looking at the pictures of the new store, practically drooling.

"Are you serious right now? Is that what you were talking about? You need some serious help, give me that," Marina scolded before abruptly stealing his phone from his hands, earning a deep scowl from her coworker. She glared at him and gestured toward the double doors. "We have more important matters to focus on! Our friend is getting *married*!"

"No arguing on my wedding day please," Ali chuckled as she stepped out of the room in front of them. The two immediately turned to her, their faces quickly morphing into one of admiration and awe. Marina's eyes swelled with tears at the sight of her best friend in the most elegant and befitting wedding dress she had ever seen. It hugged her curves beautifully from her chest to her upper thighs, before ending in regal layered ruffles — with her hair in perfectly uniform curls that satisfyingly complimented the ruffles.

"Oh, Ali, you look so gorgeous. This dress," Marina gushed, effusively motioning towards her dress before bringing her hands up to her face. "It's like it was truly *made* for you."

Brady eyed his supervisor and let out a snort. "I have never seen her this cringey before. She's not wrong though."

"Thank you, guys," Ali said with a smile before tossing him a questioning look. "Aren't you supposed to be with Sawyer?"

"Oh! That's right. I just had to come here and see you real quick to let him know how hot you look. See you down the aisle, soon-to-be Mrs. City Girl!" Brady shouted as he dashed down the hall. Marina shook her head at him, then returned her gaze to the white-wearing angel in front of her.

"So how are you feeling?"

Ali stepped back into the bridal suite to stare at herself in the mirror, with Marina trailing behind her. Her eyes slowly traveled down her body, drinking in her appearance, and she smiled at her own reflection. "I feel the most beautiful I've ever felt."

"As you should," Marina affirmed while tidying up the flounce of her dress. "Does everything feel surreal to you right now?"

"Weirdly, no," Ali replied as she fiddled with her engagement ring on her right hand. "Everything feels profoundly real, and more importantly, it feels right. Like this is exactly where I'm supposed to be."

"And Sawyer is exactly who you're supposed to be with," Marina added with a small sentimental smile, to which Ali gratefully returned. Her support meant a lot to her, and she was so thankful for Marina's understanding throughout the years. Although she may not have always approved of Sawyer, and vehemently tried to protect her heart from him in the beginning, she always had good intentions. After seeing how well they were suited for each other, she was able to put her personal bias aside and support them — which was definitely not an easy feat.

"Thank you for being my maid of honor, Marina. You've always made me feel welcome ever since I first came to town, and I've made sure to never take your kindness for granted," Ali told her, causing Marina to almost melt with emotion.

The redhead, who she knew as both her supervisor and close friend, quickly pulled her in for a hug and sighed deeply. "Of course, Ali. You genuinely have the biggest heart I know, and I treasure our friendship so much. I'm so happy you've included me in this special day, despite my criticisms of your relationship early on.

Damn, we're seeing how wrong I was now, huh?"

Ali laughed as she wrapped her arms around her friend, who carefully made sure not to ruin her hairstyle. After a moment, they parted and smiled cheekily at each other. "I wonder what the guys are talking about right now."

On a separate wing of the venue was the groom's suite, where the two coworkers sat beside each other and waited for the time to pass. Sawyer was on his phone, scrolling aimlessly, while Brady watched a reality show on the TV across from them. The sweet tooth stuffed his hand into his suit pocket and pulled out some assorted candies that he had prepared beforehand.

"You want some?" Brady offered to him without tearing his gaze away from the show. "I brought some dark chocolate ones for you. You should probably brush your teeth after you eat it though, you don't want your bride tasting that on the first kiss of your marriage. Or maybe you both are into that, I won't judge."

"I'll take a dark chocolate piece," Sawyer said, ignoring his rambling.

Brady handed him the candy and smiled. "I bet you wouldn't even mind if Ali had chocolate or worse all over her teeth, you little love-sicko."

"Of course not. She's my wife," Sawyer responded without thinking, then paused. Brady stared at him in amusement as he processed what he had just said. "My wife. Alice is really my wife."

"Well, technically, she's not your wife *yet*—"

Sawyer cut him off with a sharp glare thrown his way, inciting a grin from the lollipop lover.

"Alright, alright. Tell me though, how do you feel about this whole marriage thing now that it's finally hitting you?"

The unreadable groom mulled over the question for a long moment, while his groomsman waited impatiently and dramatically checked the time every five seconds. Four and a half candies later,

Sawyer finally answered.

"Good. I feel good."

Brady blinked slowly, his mouth slightly agape. "That's it?"

"What more is there to say?" Sawyer retorted casually as he took another candy from him. Brady remained stupefied until he finally shook his head and let out a short breath.

"You're right. I guess you feeling good is enough, as anticlimactic as it seems," Brady remarked, returning his attention to the reality show. "By the way, I forgot to tell you that Ali looks really hot in her dress."

Sawyer abruptly stood up from his seat. "I'm feeling more than good now. Let's go."

"Bet those feelings are more towards your wedding night than your wedding day," Brady muttered under his breath with a mischievous chuckle, then raised his hands in surrender when he was sent a pointed look.

The two of them made their way through the venue before entering the ceremony room one by one. Sawyer briefly glanced over at his father, one of the few guests at their intimate wedding, as he walked down the aisle. Once he arrived at the altar, he took a moment to look around and remember everything for the future. He didn't want to forget a single detail.

Soon enough, the bridal entrance song sounded throughout the venue and all of the guests stood up. Marina appeared in a satin red dress, her gaze immediately landing on Brady's, causing him to hastily finish chewing his last candy and straighten his back. She narrowed her eyes at him before plastering on a smile, giving Sawyer an encouraging thumbs-up when she passed him — as if she was wishing good luck to a child.

Then, he caught sight of her. In all of her glory.

His dark and stormy eyes shined upon seeing her, as if lightning bolts had struck within his irises. His heart began to race in

anticipation and exhilaration, void of anxiety. He could barely remain still at the altar.

She walked down the aisle with her father, who was already holding back tears. She quickly glanced at their guests and waved to a few of her old college friends that she had invited. Her eyes inevitably found its true target a second later, and a smile appeared on her face in the same instant. The green and brown hues in her eyes danced beautifully, twinkling with joy when it met his.

Sawyer stared at her lips for a moment, realizing that he would have the pleasure of seeing that bright smile of hers for the rest of his life. And she stared into his eyes, realizing that she would have the privilege of learning all about that complex mind of his for the rest of her life. They couldn't wait for all of the words and experiences they would share together.

Now, as they stood in front of each other with intertwined hands, they could almost foresee their mutual happiness in each other's eyes. Their future held nothing but hope. Marriage wouldn't be easy, just as their prior relationship wasn't, but they both wanted it more than anything. Despite the hardships, despite the difficulties, they wanted to be together.

Because at the end of the day, their everlasting love was always worth it.

And by sealing this promise with a kiss, they began their wedded journey with hammering hearts. Their guests cheered and clapped for the newlyweds, with their two favorite coworkers being the loudest.

Sawyer and Ali descended the aisle to celebrate the occasion at the reception. He paused to look at her when they were alone for a brief moment, holding her face in his hands. Her caramel-colored hair was vibrant in the light, and he was almost overwhelmed by her beauty. She, too, was entranced by the sleekness of his suit and his perfectly styled black hair.

"You look beautiful, Alice," he whispered softly to her. "My wife is beautiful."

Ali leaned into his touch, a shy smile hanging from her lips. "Thank you. My husband is beautiful too."

Sawyer slid his hand down to her jawline and pulled her in for another kiss, a deeper one. They only parted from each other when their guests began to roll in, congratulating the couple as they found their seats.

Mr. Price appeared before Ali when she stood alone, waiting for Sawyer to finish speaking with the DJ. He cleared his throat and cast her an unreadable look. "Congrats, Ali. I thank you for inviting me to an event that I had initially attempted to prevent. Your kindness is beyond me."

"Thank you," she said as she absently smoothed down her dress with her hands. "Although Sawyer didn't want to admit it, I knew he'd want you here. After all, regardless of everything that's happened, you're still his father."

He sighed, nodding, and reluctantly continued. "You're an admirable woman, Ali. I'm...glad my son was able to find someone who could give him what I never could."

Ali smiled and patted his shoulder as she walked past him. "Who says you still can't?"

Leaving him with some food for thought, the newly wedded woman met her husband on the dance floor. The two of them wrapped their arms around each other and rocked to the music. No words were needed in that precious moment as their eyes bored into one another, both of their hearts feeling full.

They leaned their foreheads against each other and closed their eyes. Ali's voice, gentle and soft, was barely above a whisper as she uttered the following words for the first time but not the last: "I love you, my husband."

Sawyer smiled and hugged her tighter. "I love you, my wife. Forever."

A/N: we're #1 in humor!!! thank you so much to everyone that interacted in any and every way with this story; i am so very grateful. next chapter is the *epilogue*! so sorry for the wait, but i appreciate all of you that stuck by me very much.

epilogue

Ali put her pencil in between her teeth as she stared at her computer screen in deep thought. After a few more moments of extra contemplation, she hit the submit button and sighed in relief. She then set the pencil down on the marble countertop and wandered over to the tall windows across from her.

The loud noises from the colorful city beyond the windows were a comfort to her, causing her heart to finally still and relax from the prior stress.

She jumped slightly when the front door suddenly opened, and without even needing to turn around, her heart began to race all over again for a much different reason. A smile crawled onto her face as she looked over her shoulder, catching sight of the alluring man in the suit.

He met her eyes and smiled back, quickly unbuttoning some of his shirt to let his chest breathe. He was almost hypnotized by the picturesque scene before him — of her standing and shining in the light, in front of a world of people, yet her eyes were only on him.

Suddenly overwhelmed with emotion, he dashed towards her and drowned himself in her arms. She raised her hands to his nape and kissed his cheek as he buried his face in her neck.

"Welcome home, Sawyer," Ali said softly, and he responded by leaving a peck on her collarbone. "How was work? Not too stressful today, I hope."

"I miss not having to deal with corporate when I was just a customer service employee," Sawyer replied as he lifted his head and looked at her.

She cocked her head and grinned. "What about that measly little paycheck? I bet you don't miss that."

He grudgingly nodded at the reminder before stuffing his head in her neck again.

A few years ago, his father had decided to gift him one of his department stores in the city, of which he would have complete managerial control over. He still, of course, had to report back to the CEO — Mr. Price — and the board of directors, and that was Sawyer's least favorite part of the job. Although he was now on relatively good terms with his father, or as good as two sociopaths can get, he still preferred to speak to him sparingly. The paycheck raise, however, kept him going despite of that. After all, he had a wife to take care of now.

"And how was your day? Finish that exam?" he asked her, encircling his arms around her waist and leaning back to watch her.

"Yes, I did. I just have a few more finals before I'm officially a college graduate!" Ali exclaimed excitedly.

After their wedding, she decided it was finally time to use the money her late grandmother left for her and finish school. Sawyer supported her every step of the way, and she was immensely grateful for all of the sleepless nights and stressful days that he fought through with her.

Sawyer hugged her tightly and left some kisses on the top of her head. "I'm proud of you, Alice."

"Thank you, my love," Ali murmured happily before they pulled apart. She glanced down at their conjoined hands as a nostalgic smile found its way onto her face. "We've been married for almost four years now. That means we've been together for a whole *decade*, can you believe it?"

"No," he answered as he began to play with her wedding band. "Feels like it's been longer than that."

"But shorter at the same time," she added, and he nodded. A moment of silence passed over them, with only the sounds of the city outside interrupting the tranquility, while the sun set.

Sawyer then cleared his throat and stared at her carefully. "Are you still okay with not having children?"

Ali smiled softly, knowing this was an uncomfortable subject for him. He had shared his feelings on it before they got married, and they discussed it extensively.

Having kids was never something he thought he could have — along with a wife — and while he was more than happy with the latter, he couldn't find the desire for the former. He didn't want to inflict the same struggles as he had on his child, he wasn't confident in his paternal abilities, and he refused to bring a person into a world that often lacked kindness.

And Ali, although she had always assumed she would have at least one child, understood his viewpoint. She respected his wishes, especially since it wasn't a deal breaker for her whatsoever. Having each other forever was fulfilling enough, and it allowed her to focus on her career.

"Yes, I still don't mind. Don't worry," she reassured him as she reached up to hold his face in her hands, watching the relieved expression form on his face. She then wrapped her arms around his neck and laid against his chest, turning her head towards the window. "Have you seen Brady and Marina's candy shop lately? The lines have been insane."

"Tourist season," he suggested, absently rocking them side to side, and she nodded.

"I'm just glad they're getting more recognition. They're such an unexpected but perfect duo, with Brady being the candy quality master and Marina being the business master. I've been seeing them all over social media, which means the marketing plans I proposed to them worked!"

Sawyer looked down at her in his arms, eyeing the proud grin on her face. "I'd expect nothing less from a dedicated, soon-to-be marketing graduate."

"Speaking of," Ali interjected, backing away from him, as she was

suddenly reminded of something. "My dad will be coming next weekend to attend my graduation and celebrate. I know you don't like having guests over, but once in a blue moon won't hurt, right?"

"It'll hurt," Sawyer said monotonously and slumped against the dinner table behind them. "But I'll bear it."

Ali chuckled. "Just for me?"

"Just for you."

"It's almost like you love me or something," she joked, feigning ignorance, and he watched her as she laughed at her own words. His eyes roamed her face like the countless times they have before, still finding something new to admire while simultaneously admiring the old.

He noticed every change in her body and mind as they aged together for the past eight years since they've shared a home. As minuscule and gradual as they were, he always took the time to remember and cherish them because he knew it'd be a piece of her that may not last forever. And he loved all of the pieces of her, with an intensity that only grew with time.

Not only that, but he knew that she loved him just as much. She never left a doubt in his mind of that, and showed her affection for him in ways that were tailored to his own emotional comprehension. Even on days when his behavior was inconsistent, callous, or reckless, she still found a way while also respecting his boundaries. She never made him feel like being married to him was a chore either, despite his concerns. At the end of the day, she loved him with a kindness that was too pure to measure, and he reciprocated it as best as he could.

Ali stopped laughing when he abruptly stood from his chair and came forward to hold her face in his hands. Their eyes bored into each other for a long moment, until he finally found the words to express the feelings in his heart.

"Before you, I would have never dreamed of a life like this. Not because I'd find it unattainable, but because I didn't even have the

capacity to imagine it," Sawyer began, his lips moving fast as his eyes never left hers. "But you've taught me how to love, and how to be loved. That alone has changed so much for me, and I'll never thank you enough for giving me the ability to live a dream I wish I had. So no, I don't almost love you. I definitely do, and I always will."

She stood there, unblinking, as she processed the beautiful words that flowed from his mouth. The sun from outside the large windows that took up the entire wall turned their apartment into a mesmerizing spectacle of orange, yellow, and violet. Yet even with the romantic atmosphere, she couldn't withhold her cheeky smile. "If I knew you'd make a passionate monologue every time, I'd always be cracking jokes like that."

"Consistency is not one of my best traits, so I wouldn't count on it," he retorted, and her smile widened. She leaned in and kissed him in a way she knew it'd make his heart skip a beat, then tore away to look at him.

"I love you too, Sawyer. And I always will, because you're better than the man of my dreams. You're more than I could have ever hoped for," she said, causing a smile to appear on his face too.

And with that, they kissed under the early moonlight in their home. They didn't know what the future held for them — the heartwarming moments they'd share throughout their lives, the arguments they'd grow better from, and the fulfillment of a life spent with that special someone from young to old — but they knew they'd love each other through it all.

He may have thought he was once the boy who didn't love, but he was mistaken.

He was merely the boy who did not know how to love yet, as someone whose understanding of emotions had never come naturally.

But she taught him how, patiently and tenderly. So now he knew, and now he could express the feelings he held for her.

And so he did, with the pleasure of her doing it as well, for the rest of their lives.

A/N: the end! it's been a long journey, but i'm very grateful for all those that have been here from the beginning, along with those that came along the way.

i'm curious to know if this story ended the way you guys thought it would. i definitely felt an air of pessimism from a lot of you, which is completely understandable considering Sawyer's condition. sorry this wasn't a dark romance for those that wanted one! i do have one in the works though...

also, anyone surprised they didn't have kids? i don't know if i may have stirred some controversy with that one or not, so let me know in the comments!

and just for fun's sake, let's reminisce together. comment down your favorite moments in the story! mine were their engagement party (Mr. Price was exposed!), their first kiss on the pier, and chapter 37 - home decor.

have any questions? comment here. i'll respond to all of them.

otherwise, thank you so much for reading and i love you all — from both me and my characters.